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*Collector's Edition*

# The Story of the **Napoleonic Wars**

Wellington and Waterloo

**Nelson's Trafalgar triumph**

The Peninsular War

**Revolutionary France**

Napoleon's divisive legacy



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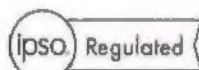
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“By the time Napoleon fled the battlefield at Waterloo in 1815, Europe had been embroiled in near-continuous conflict for more than a decade, with only a fleeting period of peace separating the hostilities from the French Revolutionary Wars of 1792–1802.

The Napoleonic Wars and their bloody prelude claimed the lives of millions of people across the continent – the sheer scale of devastation almost unprecedented in the history of Europe.

This special edition of *BBC History Magazine* reveals the story behind these turbulent times, beginning by exploring the chain of events that enabled Bonaparte to ascend from **minor Corsican nobility** to become the leader of a **mighty French empire**.

We'll offer expert insight into Lord Nelson's success at the battle of **Trafalgar** and the reasons Britain came to rule the seas during the Age of Sail, followed by a detailed analysis of Napoleon's own famous victory at **Austerlitz** just a few weeks later.

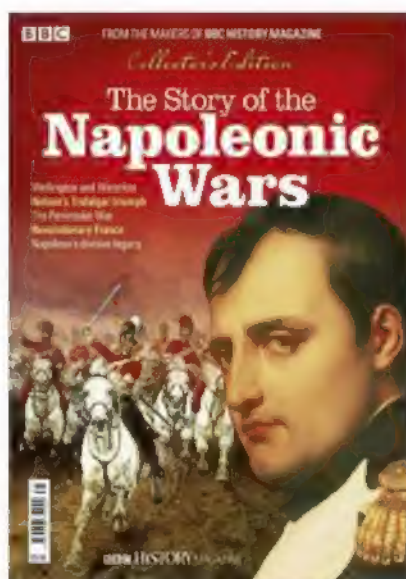
As well as his many triumphs, we'll look at the crushing lows of Napoleon's military career – notably the chaotic **Peninsular War** in Spain and Portugal, his disastrous **invasion of Russia**, and the final French defeat during the **Waterloo campaign**.

We'll also shine the spotlight on affairs away from the battlefield, examining the surprising **global consequences** of the wars, and how the legacy of the conflict continued to shape **European politics** long after Napoleon's lonely demise on St Helena.

*The Story of the Napoleonic Wars* brings together articles that have previously appeared in *BBC History Magazine* and sister title *BBC History Revealed*, along with new material written especially for this edition. I hope you find it an exciting and informative read.

## Jon Bauckham

Editor



“Napoleon's success came as much from hard work, profound thinking and forward planning as from any inherent genius”

**ANDREW ROBERTS** explains why he believes Napoleon triumphed as both a military tactician and enlightened ruler on page 76



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# Europe c1812

-  Boundary of the Confederation of the Rhine
-  States ruled by Napoleon's family
-  French Empire
-  Other dependent states

PAUL HEWITT-BATTLEFIELD DESIGN







Novgorod

Nizhniy Novgorod

Pskov

Moscow

Borodino

Tula

Tambov

Saratov

Polotsk

Smolensk

Livny

Pavlovsk

Belograd

Kharkov

Poltava

Kiev

Rostov

Elizabetgrad

Kherson

Odessa

Kerch

Sebastopol

Sinope

Bucharest

Belgrade

Sofia

Adrianople

Constantinople

Brusa

Kayseri

Konya

Adana

Aleppo

Adalia

Smyrna

Athens

Corinth

CRETE

CYPRUS

BALTIC SEA

RUSSIA

PRUSSIA

GRAND DUCHY OF WARSAW

SILESIA

AUSTRIA

BESSARABIA

MOLDAVIA

CRIMEA

BLACK SEA

OTTOMAN

EMPIRE

ADRIATIC SEA

NAPLES

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

0 100 300 miles



# Timeline

**Jeremy Black** charts Napoleon's rise to power in Revolutionary France and the dramatic chain of events leading up to his final defeat at Waterloo

## 20 April 1792

### Start of the French Revolutionary Wars

Three years into the French Revolution, France's Legislative Assembly declares war on Austria, fearing that it will launch an invasion in a bid to restore the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI. A Prussian-led coalition army attempts to march on Paris in September, but it is defeated at Valmy, around 108 miles from the capital. The first stage of the French Revolutionary Wars – commonly known as the War of the First Coalition – is now underway.



The final moments of the French king, Louis XVI

## 21 January 1793

### Louis XVI is executed

Having been convicted of high treason, Louis XVI is beheaded by guillotine in what is now Place de la Concorde, Paris. The execution sparks outrage among the monarchies of Europe.



1790



The battle of Jemappes is an early victory for the new French Republic

## 22 September 1792

### The French Republic is born

Emboldened by the victory at Valmy, the revolutionaries abolish Louis XVI's constitutional monarchy and proclaim the new French Republic. In November, General Charles François Dumouriez leads an army into the Austrian Netherlands (now Belgium) to prevent an invasion of France via the Low Countries, defeating the main Austrian force in the region at the battle of Jemappes.

1795

## 1 June 1794

### Britain's 'Glorious First of June'

With Britain now part of the coalition of powers fighting France, a fleet led by Admiral Lord Howe attacks 26 French warships sent to escort an American grain convoy into Brest. The vital convoy does reach France, but superior British gunnery costs the French seven warships (six captured and one sunk) and 5,000 casualties.

## 14 February 1797

### Spain is defeated at Cape St Vincent

With Spain now allied to the French Republic, Britain's Admiral Sir John Jervis (pictured below) and 15 warships attack a Spanish fleet of 27 off southern Portugal. Thanks to a melee created by the then-commander Horatio Nelson, British captains win several individual ship encounters. Their superior rate of fire has a deadly effect and four Spanish ships are captured.



GETTY IMAGES





Arranging his forces in a military formation known as the 'square', Napoleon resists repeated attacks to win victory in Egypt

## 21 July 1798

### Battle of the Pyramids

A young general, Napoleon Bonaparte, leads an invasion of Ottoman-ruled Egypt in an effort to defend French trade interests and weaken Britain's access to India. At the so-called battle of the Pyramids, he repels the Mamluk cavalry to seize Lower Egypt.



An 1803 cartoon depicts a cross-Channel face-off between Napoleon and Britain's prime minister Henry Addington

## 27 March 1802

### The Peace of Amiens

Britain, Spain and the Batavian Republic (the Netherlands) agree a peace treaty with France in the city of Amiens, marking the end of the War of the Second Coalition and the French Revolutionary Wars as a whole. The French signatory is Napoleon's older brother, Joseph Bonaparte.

## 18 May 1803

### Hostilities resume

Just 14 months after the Peace of Amiens, Britain declares war on France, with Napoleon's refusal to make a trade treaty one of its grievances. In response, the French leader begins to assemble his huge Armée d'Angleterre ('Army of England') along the coast near Boulogne and prepares to launch an invasion. The Napoleonic Wars begin, and major European powers unite against France as part of the Third Coalition.

# 1800



Napoleon mounts a coup that overthrows the government and is then installed as leader of France

## 9–10 November 1799

### Napoleon seizes power

Having made his name in Italy and Egypt, Napoleon returns to France to find the government under pressure after setbacks in the War of the Second Coalition (led by Britain, Austria and Russia). He mounts a bloodless coup and becomes first consul of France, eventually crowning himself emperor in 1804.

## 14 June 1800

### A decisive moment at Marengo

Napoleon's opening campaign as first consul is an invasion of northern Italy, beginning with a crossing of the Great St Bernard Pass. At Marengo, he finds the Austrians a formidable rival, and his enforced retreat for much of the battle is only reversed following a successful counter-attack by French reinforcements. A quarter of the French army become casualties. The Austrians ask for an armistice.



A plate from Napoleon's dinner set portrays a scene on the Great St Bernard Pass

## 20 October 1805

### The French leader shows his brilliance at Ulm

Attacking the Austrians in the War of the Third Coalition, Napoleon moves his Grande Armée (a 'Great Army', comprising troops from the Armée d'Angleterre) by rapid marches that outmanoeuvre part of the Austrian army based at Ulm. In the face of his brilliant strategic campaign the enemy surrenders (although Austria remains in the war), opening the way for the overrunning of southern Germany.





A relief panel on the pedestal of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square depicts the moment he was fatally injured in battle

## 21 October 1805

### Britain's Royal Navy triumphs at Trafalgar

Vice Admiral Lord Nelson intercepts a Franco-Spanish fleet off Cape Trafalgar near Cádiz. The British attack in two divisions, splitting the opponents into groups. The battle then becomes a series of small struggles between individual ships or groups in which British gunnery and seamanship prevails, albeit at the cost of heavy casualties – including Nelson himself. Meanwhile, Napoleon's planned invasion of Britain has failed to materialise.

## 14 October 1806

### Prussian resistance is crushed

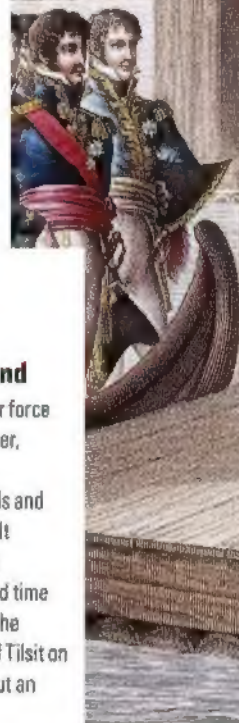
Frederick William III of Prussia (shown below) joins Russia as part of the Fourth Coalition, but Napoleon attacks before Russian reinforcements can arrive. At the twin battles of Jena and Auerstädt in Saxony, the poorly-commanded Prussian forces are defeated.

Napoleon crushes what he thinks is the main body of the Prussian army at Jena, but it is actually at Auerstädt, where

it is expertly defeated by Marshal Louis-Nicolas Davout.



Napoleon and Tsar Alexander agree a peace treaty at Tilsit, East Prussia, signed on a raft on the Niemen river



## 14 June 1807

### Battle of Friedland

Russia, with an inferior force and their backs to a river, attacks the French at Friedland. The plan fails and leads to heavy losses. It leaves the Russians so battered that they need time to rebuild their army. The subsequent Treaties of Tilsit on 7 and 9 July bring about an uneasy peace.

1805

## 2 December 1805

### Battle of Austerlitz

In perhaps his greatest ever victory, Napoleon defeats a larger Russian and Austrian army near the town of Austerlitz (now in the Czech Republic). Around 16,000 Austrian and Russian troops are killed or wounded, with 11,000 taken prisoner. The defeat leads Francis I of Austria to accept a harsh peace two days later.

## 7–8 February 1807

### Napoleon struggles at Eylau

Moving east, Napoleon finds the Russians to be tough opponents. At Eylau in East Prussia, repeated French attacks fail to break the Russians, who withdraw during the night. French casualties are heavy and, although Napoleon gains possession of the battlefield and Russian losses are heavier, he wins neither tactically nor strategically.

## 5 May 1808

### The costly Peninsular War begins

After Portugal refuses to adopt Napoleon's Continental System (blocking it from trading with Britain), he invades the country via Spain, causing the royal family to flee. He then occupies Madrid, sparking a mass uprising, before overthrowing the Spanish monarchy on 5 May 1808. The Peninsular War ensues, with Anglo-Portuguese troops securing early victories against the French at Rolica and Vimeiro in August.

Napoleon's Imperial Guard seen in falling snow at the indecisive battle of Eylau in 1807







At Wagram, Archduke Charles of Austria is driven from the field of battle by Napoleon

## 5–6 July 1809

### The French counter-attack at Wagram

After failure at Aspern-Essling, Napoleon counter-attacks north of Vienna at Wagram. He drives Archduke Charles from the field, helped by a successful flank manoeuvre, but the Austrian army is not routed. Both sides use artillery to great effect. Wagram is followed by peace with Austria on French terms.

## 7 September 1812

### A deadly day at Borodino

The Russians attempt to stop Napoleon's advance on Moscow at Borodino – a battle involving around 250,000 men and in excess of 1,100 cannon. The battle lasts all day with total casualties of some 77,000. The Russians resist French attacks and are driven back without breaking. Napoleon refuses to commit his Imperial Guard, which might have been decisive. The Russians abandon the battlefield at night. Despite heavier Russian casualties, it is Napoleon's losses – about a quarter of his army – that are crucial.

1810



Napoleon withdraws across the Danube after tough opposition from Austria at Aspern-Essling

## 21–22 May 1809

### Napoleon faces a challenge by the Danube

Austria resumes conflict with France in 1809 as part of the Fifth Coalition. The first major battle, fought at Aspern and Essling near Vienna, reflects little credit on Napoleon, whose bold attack on a superior Austrian force is repelled, before a serious Austrian assault leaves the French isolated on the north bank of the Danube. The French army is not destroyed, but Napoleon abandons the battlefield.

## 24–25 June 1812

### France invades Russia

Napoleon seeks to deal with the crisis in his relations with Russia by striking at the centre of its power, and with an army so large that it will guarantee victory. More than 600,000 French and allied troops cross the Niemen river and invade Russian territory without resistance, denying Napoleon the decisive battle he had initially sought.



Napoleon crosses the Niemen river into Russian territory without resistance



## Timeline



Napoleon enters Moscow only to find that the city has been torched – probably by the Russians themselves

### 14 September 1812

#### Napoleon enters Moscow

After the battle of Borodino, the road to Moscow is left open. Napoleon enters an undefended city on 14 September, only to find it set ablaze that night. Alexander I refuses to negotiate and Napoleon's supply situation deteriorates, forcing him to abandon Moscow on 19 October. Heavy snowfalls turn the retreat into a nightmare and thousands of troops die. Meanwhile, the costly Peninsular War in Spain and Portugal continues to drain Napoleon's resources even further.

Napoleon says farewell to the Imperial Guard in Fontainebleau after abdicating in April 1814



### 6 April 1814

#### Napoleon abdicates

In early 1814, Napoleon, with some success, attacks the Austro-Prussian-Russian forces that invade eastern France, manoeuvring with skill to destroy the most exposed units. Their superior numbers tell, however, and the coalition troops march into Paris. A provisional government deposes Napoleon and he formally abdicates on 6 April. Unaware of the news, Britain's Arthur Wellesley captures Toulouse a few days later, having invaded France via the Pyrenees.



## 1815

### 26–27 August 1813

#### Battle of Dresden

In 1813, Prussia, Austria and Sweden join Russia in the fight against a now-outnumbered Napoleon as part of the Sixth Coalition. They plan to avoid direct battle with him and only attack forces led by his subordinates. However, Frederick William III of Prussia insists on fighting the French emperor, and an army commanded by Prince Schwarzenberg is beaten by Napoleon at Dresden.



Napoleon's triumphant entry into Dresden after his victory against Prince Schwarzenberg's army in 1813

### 16–19 October 1813

#### Severe losses at Leipzig

At the battle of the Nations at Leipzig, Napoleon is heavily outnumbered by converging Allied forces. Unable to defeat his opponents, whom he nevertheless holds off, he decides to retreat. In total, the French lose around 68,000 men.

### 1 March 1815

#### An unexpected return

Napoleon escapes from exile on the Mediterranean island of Elba with a small flotilla and about 1,100 troops. He comes ashore near Antibes, southern France, on 1 March where the garrison surrenders. The army of the new French king, Louis XVIII, proves unwilling to mount effective opposition, and on 20 March, Napoleon enters Paris to reclaim power. Louis has already fled the city.



Napoleon arrives near Antibes after his escape from exile on Elba

GETTY IMAGES/SALAMY





## 15 June 1815

### The Waterloo campaign begins

As coalition forces prepare to mount an invasion of France, Napoleon decides the best way of breaking it down is to attack the powers individually. In what is now Belgium, he plans a concentration of troops south of the Prussian and British-led armies, with the intention of following it with a rapid advance designed to defeat them separately before advancing on Brussels.

## 18 June 1815

### Wellington's triumph

Napoleon's hopes are crushed at Waterloo as a result of a defensive engagement with the British-led army under Arthur Wellesley (now Duke of Wellington), joined later in the day by the Prussian army, which moves to their support. Napoleon's lack of operational and tactical imagination plays a major part in his defeat.



The Waterloo Medal is later issued to all ranks of the British Army who fought at Waterloo.



Napoleon is exiled twice – first to Elba and, after his regime finally falls, to St Helena, where he spends the rest of his days.

## 15 July 1815

### Final surrender

Facing rising opposition and an erosion of support, Napoleon's regime collapses. Having abdicated in favour of his son on 22 June, he plans to go to America, but a British naval blockade makes it impossible. Feeling he will get better treatment from Britain than other foes, he boards HMS *Bellerophon* on 15 July. He is sent to the island of St Helena, in the distant south Atlantic, where he is imprisoned until his death on 5 May 1821.

Jeremy Black is emeritus professor of history at the University of Exeter. His most recent books are *Combined Operations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) and *Fortifications and Siegecraft* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

## 9 June 1815

### The Congress of Vienna ends

Following months of negotiations in Vienna, ambassadors from several major powers (including Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia) sign an act that redistributes a number of European territories. The objective is to create long-term peace by settling issues arising from both the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars.

## 16 June 1815

### A futile French victory at Ligny

The French defeat the Prussians at Ligny but Napoleon can't outflank them as he had hoped. He instead has to rely on costly frontal attacks that drive the Prussians back without breaking them. French losses ensure Napoleon has a smaller margin of manpower for subsequent operations. To the northwest, the French are less successful against a British-led allied force at Quatre Bras.



Prussians at the battle of Ligny. They are driven back but escape to play an important role at Waterloo.



# WAR & REVOLUTION

A scene from the French Revolution shown in a print from 1789. The event ushered in years of political turmoil





## **The French Revolution and its aftermath**

Napoleon's rise to power ended political instability and war that followed the Revolution

## **Napoleon is coming**

Bonaparte's imperial ambitions extended across the Channel. Just how did Britain deal with him?

## **Victory at Trafalgar**

An expert insight into the dramatic naval battle of 1805 and how it ended the French dream of invading Britain

## **Nelson: the legend**

He was an iconic admiral in an era of conflict. We examine 10 moments that propelled him to greatness





## French Revolutionary Wars

The storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1793, as depicted by artist Charles Thévenin. The French Revolutionary Wars followed when the French government attempted to defend – and then expand – its territory.





# Napoleon's chance

The ending of privilege in France gave the young Napoleon the opportunity to shine in his military career, says **Marisa Linton**, but what really allowed him to rise to the top was his astute exploitation of the political instability and years of war that followed the French Revolution





**I**t was the French Revolution that made the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte possible. The Revolution of 1789 brought down the centuries-old regime of absolute monarchy and privileged nobility.

In its place the revolutionaries founded a new regime based on principles of individual liberty, equal rights, and popular sovereignty. Yet the ensuing 10 years of political instability would be exploited by Bonaparte to seize power in a militarist regime which was, in some ways, more autocratic than that of Louis XVI and, in terms of the millions of casualties of the Napoleonic Wars, much more lethal.

The Revolution smashed the stranglehold of hereditary privilege and venality, hitherto endemic in all parts of old regime society. Many young men profited from the ending of privilege to forge careers in the higher ranks of the army. Bonaparte was one of them. Although his family were minor nobility, they were also Corsican, and of Italian origin (France had conquered Corsica in 1769), the kind of people who, before the Revolution, were looked down upon as foreigners and outsiders.

The disastrous decision of the revolutionary leaders to go to war against the European powers opposed to the Revolution set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the revolutionary government becoming ever more dependent on the armies and their generals. Tensions were inflamed by the émigrés – French opponents of the Revolution who had fled abroad and agitated for the foreign powers to invade France and overturn the Revolution.

The move to war was spearheaded by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, leader of the 'Girondin' revolutionaries, who declared that France must wage "a crusade for universal liberty", exporting the Revolution abroad. Brissot assumed that the people of western Europe would welcome French soldiers bringing 'liberty'. Brissot was opposed by a very different revolutionary, Maximilien Robespierre. The Revolution, Robespierre warned, could not and should not be spread by invading armies at the point of bayonets. He gave the prescient warning: "No one welcomes armed liberators". Brissot's strategy, said Robespierre, would put France – and the Revolution – at the mercy of the military elite whose loyalty to the Revolution was far from certain.

But Brissot's belligerent rhetoric caught the popular mood. Robespierre's opposition to war was denounced as 'unpatriotic'. In April 1792 France declared war on Austria, setting in motion a conflict that would last

### **When the Jacobin government fell, the Revolution changed track from defensive to expansionist... Bonaparte was alive to the new opportunities**

(with two short-lived breaks in 1802 and 1814) for a generation, ending only with the final overthrow of Napoleon at Waterloo in June 1815. Contrary to the warmongers' optimistic expectations, the initial war went badly for France. Paris was for a time in danger of falling to invading armies. The resultant crisis polarised tensions and brought about a second revolution, in August 1792, that overthrew the constitutional monarchy and installed a republic.

War intensified, and by the spring of 1793 France was confronted by enemies on all sides, with Britain joining the conflict after the execution of the French king in January 1793. It was against the backdrop of war that the revolutionaries formed a government led by Jacobins – radical revolutionaries – who resorted to the use of terror, including that new invention, the guillotine.

In the crisis of 1793–94, Robespierre, once an opponent of the death penalty, became, like many other revolutionaries, an

advocate of terror. Yet he remained deeply uneasy at the militarisation of the Revolution. He warned that military expansion put unprecedented power into the hands of generals, pointing at historical figures, such as Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell, who had used their ascendancy over their armies to seize personal power, toppling republican or revolutionary regimes. Already two revolutionary generals, Lafayette and Dumouriez, had tried to lead their armies against the revolutionary government. Fearful of further betrayals, revolutionary leaders used terror to control and eliminate generals whose ambitions, loyalty and competence were suspect. They took no chances. During 1793 to 1794 many generals were arrested, and several executed.

In June 1794 the French armies won a major victory at Fleurus against a coalition army led by the Habsburg field marshal Prince Josias of Coburg, which ended the danger of invasion and thus the need for terror, paving the way for the fall of Robespierre and the Jacobins. Robespierre was retrospectively stigmatised as having been the mastermind behind a regime of terror in which, in reality, many revolutionaries had been deeply involved.

After the fall of the Jacobin government, the Revolutionary Wars changed track from defensive to expansionist. Military success became about exploiting the resources of other countries, and shoring up the survival of the new political regime, the Directory.

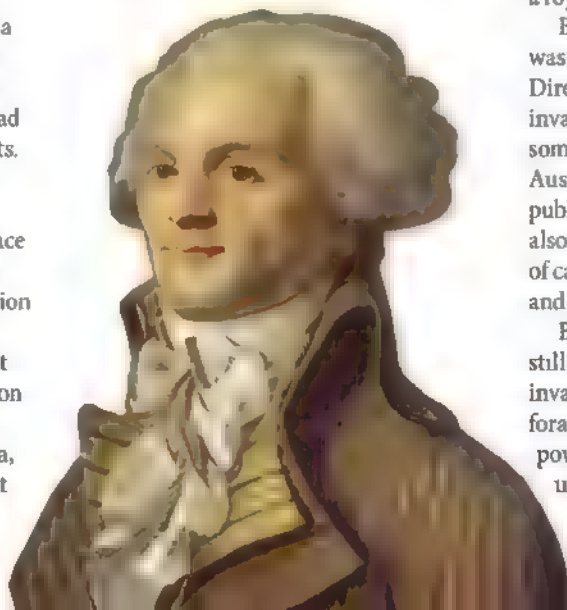
#### **Bonaparte's big break**

Napoleon, always deeply ambitious, was alive to the new opportunities on offer. He abandoned his brief flirtation with Jacobinism (he had been imprisoned for a time after the fall of Robespierre, being suspected of Jacobin sympathies), and a chance to rescue his military career soon arrived in October 1795 when he was entrusted with the suppression of the Vendémiaire uprising, a royalist revolt in Paris.

But his big break came in 1796 when he was nominated by Paul Barras, one of the Directors, to lead the French army in an invasion of northern Italy. His troops won some spectacular victories against the Austrians, and he established a Cisalpine Republic, with equality under the law. But he also sent back looted art treasures and plenty of cash – 15 million francs worth in 1796, and a further 35 million the following spring.

Bonaparte returned to Paris full of a new, still more ambitious plan, to mount a French invasion of Egypt. It would be France's first foray into establishing itself as a colonial power in North Africa. Bonaparte hoped to use Egypt as a route to India to challenge

Robespierre opposed the decision to go to war, warning that revolution could not be spread at the point of bayonets







Napoleon with the flagstaff of the Armée d'Italie after he led the French force in a successful invasion of northern Italy in 1796 (painting by Antoine-Jean Gros). He returned to Paris full of ambitious plans.



Bonaparte at the battle of the Pyramids in July 1798. He hoped to replicate Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt.

Napoleon encounters plague in Jaffa. After quitting a disastrous Middle East campaign, he managed to return to France in 1799 as a victor.





British colonial power there.

Bonaparte wrote to the leaders of the Directory: "The time is not far when we will think that in order to truly destroy England, we have to take Egypt". Bonaparte's strategy was supported by the foreign minister, Talleyrand, former old regime bishop and blue-blooded noble, who had turned revolutionary before taking fright at the radical Jacobin regime. Now a key player in the Directory, Talleyrand was a political survivor and cunning strategist. Bonaparte would make full use of Talleyrand's diplomatic skills, even while dubbing him a "shit in a silk stocking". Bonaparte also had secret personal motives for fixing on Egypt, stemming from his belief in his own 'great man' destiny. He was consciously walking in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, hoping to replicate Alexander's conquest of Egypt.

The French armies arrived in Egypt in July 1798. Bonaparte presented himself to the Egyptians as the bringer of liberty. He declared his aim was to help them throw off their Mamluk oppressors, while respecting their religious beliefs and cultural customs. In a proclamation to the Egyptians he stated: "I am come to restore your rights, punish your usurpers, and raise the true worship of Mohammed... I venerate, more than do the Mamluks, God, His prophet, and the Koran". He also presented his invasion of Egypt as a force for scientific progress and European Enlightenment; along with the armies he brought scientists and artists.

### **From one crisis to another**

After victory at the battle of the Pyramids near Cairo, events soon took a dire turn for the French. They were heavily defeated in Aboukir Bay by the British naval fleet, led by Horatio Nelson, in what became known as the battle of the Nile. British ships then blockaded the French, trapping them in a hostile environment among an increasingly hostile population. The French soldiers were ill-equipped for a campaign in the heat of the desert: lack of water, lack of food, and spreading sickness decimated their ranks. Bonaparte ordered an extension of the invasion into the western edges of what is now the Middle East. His soldiers took the city of Jaffa, massacring thousands of its civilian inhabitants, before many of the French in their turn fell victim to the plague.

Seeing the scale of the debacle and hearing that a renewed political crisis in France was offering the opportunity he had been seeking, Bonaparte slipped away in secret, abandoning the soldiers and evading the British blockade. He arrived back in France in October 1799, before news could spread of the extent of his military disasters.

## **Bonaparte promised that he would stay in power just so long as it took to resolve the political crisis and ensure the security of the state**

Always an astute propagandist, and never more so than at this critical moment, Bonaparte presented himself as a victor, with large crowds turning out to welcome him as France's potential saviour.

Meanwhile, the Directory was lurching from one crisis to another, its leaders determined to avoid any return to the political radicalism and violence of 1793–94, and becoming ever more reliant on the military to stave off the threat posed by royalists on the right and Jacobins on the left. Corruption was rife, and individuals made vast sums from the political and social crisis, particularly out of the lucrative contracts to supply the armies.

A group of leaders, including Talleyrand, and the Director, Sieyès, another former revolutionary, determined to initiate a coup to bring down the Directory and install a strong military leader in its place. One of the Directors, Barras, was notoriously corrupt and it was a simple, if expensive, matter to buy his silence and acquiescence. Even so, it was nearly not Bonaparte who was the beneficiary of the last crisis of the Republic. Sieyès personally disliked Bonaparte, and turned to him only when Sieyès's first choice for a military leader, general Barthélemy Joubert, died fighting in Italy in August.

The coup of 18 Brumaire (the date according to the revolutionary calendar), 9 November 1799, that brought Bonaparte to power became an object lesson in how to destroy an elected government. With the executive power of the Directory nullified, it remained only to bring down the legislative parliamentary body. Bonaparte's brother, Lucien, succeeded in getting himself elected as president of the Council of Five-Hundred, the main parliamentary body, thus giving himself a deciding voice.

A lie was concocted that the Jacobins were planning a conspiracy to attack the deputies. The Council of Five-Hundred

was moved out of Paris to Saint-Cloud, supposedly for its own safety, but in fact making the deputies more vulnerable to a military takeover.

The plan was that Bonaparte would enter the debating chamber to address the deputies directly, and explain the rationale leading him to assume power. When Bonaparte later recalled his part in the coup he presented himself as the master of events, the heroic saviour, rising above party faction, to bring order and security out of chaos. The reality was far different: he was no public speaker, and when he met with furious opposition from some of the deputies who shouted, "Down with the dictator!" he stammered and was barely coherent. Eventually he fainted, then fled from the chamber.

It was his brother, Lucien, who saved the day for the Bonapartes by going outside to the soldiers guarding the Council and telling them that his brother was being threatened by 'assassins'. Lucien assured the troops that his brother's sole desire was to defend sacred liberty, and produced a sword which, in a theatrical gesture, he held to his brother's breast, vowing to kill his brother should he prove to be a liar. The ploy worked. Soldiers entered the Council's chamber and used fixed bayonets to disperse the deputies, who fled for their lives through the windows out into the park of Saint-Cloud, where twilight had fallen and darkness was gathering.

Bonaparte made many promises and assurances – that he would protect and maintain the Republic; that he would defend the principles of the Revolution; that he would stay in power just so long as it took to resolve the political crisis and ensure the security of the state. He kept none of them.


One of Bonaparte's greatest tactical assets as a leader would be his ability to cement his popularity through plausible lies skilfully delivered to a public that was ready to believe him. For those who remained unconvinced, he would be equally ready to employ coercion and ruthless repression. Bonaparte's regime was not a naked military dictatorship. He was careful to maintain the appearance, at least, of a consultative regime, with elected assemblies and plebiscites (referendums).

Real power would rest firmly in Napoleon's hands, but he knew that his popularity and his acceptance by the French people would depend on the continuance of his military successes as his armies marched through Europe. **11**

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# NAPOLÉON IS COMING

When Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned emperor in 1804, his imperial ambitions extended to the islands across the Channel. **Nicholas Best** explains how Napoleon intended to invade Britain, and what Britain planned to do to stop him



BACKGROUND Napoleon Bonaparte is crowned emperor of France with Joséphine as empress, Notre Dame, 2 December 1804 (see detail overleaf)  
RIGHT *Napoleon in his Study* by French painter Paul Delacroix





**N**apoleon's coronation took place in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, on 2 December 1804. Clad

from head to toe in satin and diamonds, he marched up the aisle, wearing high-heeled shoes and carrying the sceptre of Charlemagne in his right hand.

He was received by the Pope, who had travelled from Rome for the enthronement. In a ceremony that was partly religious but mostly secular, Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned with a diadem of gold laurel leaves designed to make him look like a Roman emperor. He placed the crown firmly on his own head at the climax of the proceedings, rather than receive it from the Catholic Church, as custom demanded. The Pope looked on with barely suppressed disapproval.

Afterwards, Napoleon and his wife Joséphine emerged from Notre Dame to a mixed reception from the crowds lining the streets for the procession. Whatever his military achievements, Napoleon was far from popular with the ordinary people of Paris. They enjoyed the spectacle of the coronation – all the fireworks and illuminations – but they had little real enthusiasm for Napoleon himself, as he sourly noted. If anything, they preferred his wife. It was a critical time for Napoleon. He had been declared emperor in May as a “sure means of establishing peace and quiet in France”. Despite the horrors of the French Revolution, the country was still monarchist at heart and had grown weary of the constant plots against its head of state.

By making Napoleon emperor and guaranteeing the succession to his heirs, the French were hoping to put an end to the attempts on his life and secure the continuity and stability of the new regime. But there were still plenty of people in France who preferred a return of the Bourbons to the promotion of this Corsican upstart.

The flames of discontent were vigorously fanned by the British, who saw Napoleon as a threat to world order. Convinced that he was using the 1802 Peace of Amiens as a breathing space in his quest for domination of Europe, the British had declared war again in May 1803, before Napoleon could complete the build up of his armed forces. Their aim now was to topple him by any legitimate means possible.

They baulked at assassinating a foreign head of state, but were quite happy to finance Napoleon's overthrow by his own people, if it



Napoleon's self-aggrandising coronation as emperor in 1804 was a lavish event, reminiscent of the investiture of French kings

could be arranged. Large supplies of gold coin were stored at Walmer Castle, Kent, for the purpose. The money was shipped across to France at night, along with a constant stream of spies and agents provocateurs seeking to bring an end to Napoleon's rule.

The traffic was so intense that Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, had lodged a formal protest, accusing the British of interfering in France's internal affairs. The British had huffed and puffed, but had been unable to deny this diplomatic faux pas. “It is an acknowledged Right of Belligerent Powers to avail themselves of any discounts existing in the countries with which they happen to be at war,” they had claimed in response.

The French in turn had decided that the quickest way to end the war was to invade Britain before the British could effect an

**Napoleon's aim was for France to supplant Britain as the richest and most powerful trading nation on earth, with himself at the country's head**

alliance with Russia and Austria. Once the British had been subdued, there would be no alliance and Napoleon would be free to concentrate on his ambitions in Italy, Egypt, Turkey and northern Europe. He coveted Britain's imperial possessions as well – the sugar islands of the West Indies and the seemingly bottomless resources of India. His aim was for France to supplant Britain as the richest and most powerful trading nation on earth, with himself at the country's head. He saw himself as another Charlemagne, moulding all of western Europe into a new Frankish empire. There would be little to stop him, once the British were out of the way.

### A great army indeed

Napoleon began to assemble his invasion force immediately after the resumption of the war in 1803. Later to be renamed the Grande Armée (“Great Army”), it was known initially as the Army of England and at its peak numbered perhaps 167,000 men – an astonishing figure in the days when the logistics of maintaining a large force were far more formidable than now. Most were housed in camps specially built along the cliff tops between Calais and Boulogne, with a perfect view of England in clear weather.

The troops looking across the Channel were the elite of the French army, carefully selected for the task ahead. Almost all the officers had seen active service in Italy, Egypt and other campaigns. So had more than half the men. With commanders as distinguished as Ney, Soult and Davout, there had never been an army like it in modern times.

“I do not believe,” wrote one of their junior officers, “that there existed at any period, nor in any country, such an excellent military school as there was at the Boulogne camp. The general who had command of it, the generals under his orders, and the troops which it comprised were all drafted from the pick of the French army, and the greatest general that had ever appeared, Napoleon Bonaparte, used to come himself frequently to inspect those old troops and the young fighting men who were being formed under those excellent models.”

The new emperor knew exactly what he would do when his men had captured London. Napoleon claimed: “With God's help I will put an end to the future and very existence of England”. King George would be overthrown and a republic proclaimed, with liberty, equality and fraternity for all. The nobility would be abolished and their lands and fine houses would be confiscated. The House of Lords would be abolished as well. The House of Commons would be



...therefore an addition I wish you to make me a Knight of Malta."

Napoleon and John Bull  
("I'll see you Damned first")  
in Cruickshank's engraving  
*A Proposal from the  
New Emperor*, 9 July 1804



## BRITAIN'S BOGEYMAN

allowed to remain, but only after major reform. There would be democracy for all and a redistribution of property to favour of the ordinary working man. A proclamation was to be issued, announcing that the French came as friends, to restore popular government and liberate common people from a corrupt aristocracy.

Before any of that could be done however, Napoleon had to get his troops across the Channel. They practised the invasion repeatedly on nearby beaches, storming ashore from their landing craft to seize the cliffs of Boulogne. Sometimes they came ashore under gunfire from their own batteries, to give them a taste of what the real thing would be like. For the younger soldiers, these live-firing exercises were often all too realistic: "During a practice attack, I sniffed the scent of powder for the first time and received my baptism of fire. I hate to admit it, but I was really frightened! The terrible reality of danger, the brutality of cannon balls, bullets flying, corpses lying around would make any recruit's heart beat faster. But we

Bonaparte was a great bogeyman for the British, and in popular culture became the personification of all their fears. According to a nursery rhyme, Napoleon ("Bonaparte") was as tall and black as Raven stooping, dipping every day on naughty people. Children were warned that he would come down the chimney and get them if they didn't behave. School books were printed with a picture of "Nappy" in the corner, brandishing a set of nine tails. Cartoons depicted him as an evil dwarf or a Cornish fox. One showed a market displaying Bonaparte's head on a pitchfork: "Hail my little Boney, what dost think of Johnny Bull now? Plunder our houses, hey! Ravish all our wives and daughters, hey! The British were extremely nervous about Napoleon."



soon got used to it. A searching look from the veterans, a scornful smile, above all the fear of ridicule, banished all nervousness and we ended up encouraging danger."

### Britain will be mine, all mine

Napoleon oversaw the training from a wooden pavilion that had been built for him at Boulogne, on the cliff next to the telegraph station. The pavilion contained a four foot telescope on a mahogany tripod, pointing towards Dover. On clear days, Napoleon liked to look across the sea to the castle, muttering to himself that England would be his with a few hours of calm weather.

It was in the pavilion that his admirals tried to explain the difficulties of the invasion to him. Napoleon had assembled a flotilla of more than 2,000 vessels for the crossing, but they were crammed so tight into the Channel ports that it would be impossible to launch them all on one tide. It would need several days of calm weather to get all the ships to sea, by which time the Royal Navy would certainly have launched a counter attack. There were sandbanks to negotiate as well, and treacherous currents off the English coast. The flotilla's flat-bottomed barges were ideal for running troops ashore, but highly unsafe for a Channel crossing. They would be swamped in even

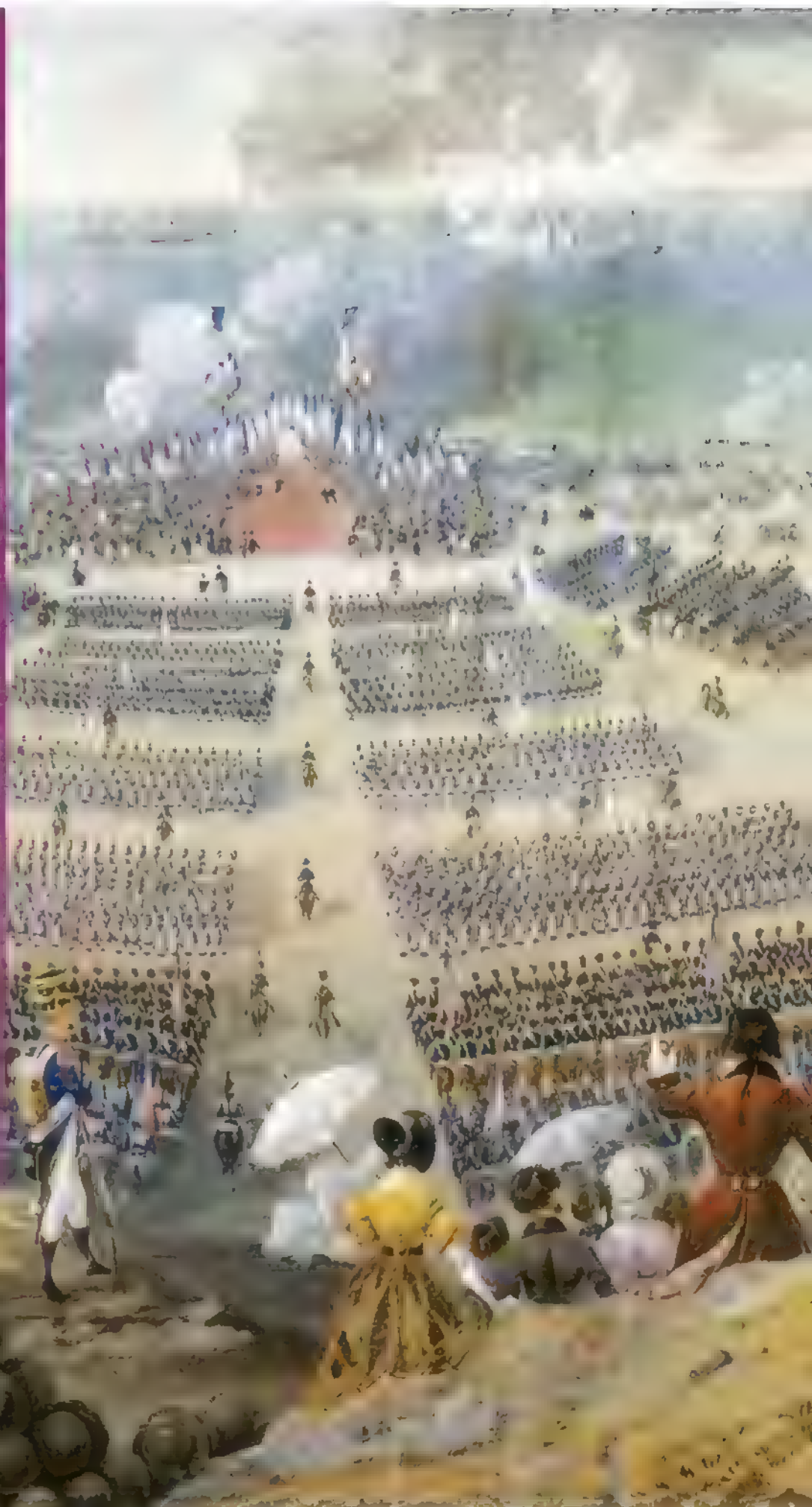
## PITCHFORKS AT THE READY

Britain was ill-prepared for an attack. Full Napoleon landed


Invasion seemed imminent to the British after the resumption of the war in 1803. The tents of Napoleon's army were clearly visible along the cliffs between Calais and Boulogne, growing more numerous by the day. The army's lights shone threateningly at night and its guns could sometimes be heard booming across the water. More than once, people in Dover and Folkestone packed their valuables and fled inland, convinced that the activity on the opposite shore heralded the beginning of the invasion.

The country was woefully ill-prepared for an attack. The navy was short of ships and the army thinly spread along an invasion coastline stretching from Yarmouth to Land's End. Thousands of civilians had rushed to join the Militia or the Volunteers, but there weren't enough uniforms for them at first, let alone weapons. "You must train yourselves to wield a pitch-fork or a hedgestake. If you cannot procure a musquet," they were advised instead.

The coast had few permanent defences either. Apart from Dover Castle and a couple of crumbling Tudor forts, Kent and Sussex had no military strong points. The defences were so weak that Bonaparte and his army would almost certainly be in London within five days of coming ashore.







Napoleon's impressive  
forces shown massing at  
Boulogne, 16 August 1804

**With the flotilla  
assembled and the  
army ready to go,  
the only remaining  
obstacle was the  
Royal Navy, which  
maintained a  
constant blockade  
of the Channel ports**

the lightest of swells, and thousands would drown. The whole operation was fraught with difficulties that Napoleon, who was a soldier rather than a sailor, had not properly considered when he drew up his plans.

But he was determined to invade, whatever the problems might be. He would not have a free hand in the rest of Europe until the British had been eliminated. The British knew it and stepped up their espionage as Napoleon's activities gathered pace. In June 1804 alone, eight smartly-dressed Englishmen had been captured at Boulogne, carrying incendiary devices to set fire to the flotilla. They were shot within the hour.

The men were followed by another Englishman who was searched in front of Napoleon himself and found to have a map sewn into his clothes. The map showed all the latest Boulogne fortifications, including Napoleon's pavilion on the cliff. "All right," the man admitted, as the French ripped the lining of his waistcoat. "The game's up. There's 20 guineas gone."

Boldest of all was the beautiful English woman who presented herself to Napoleon's staff one day, insisting that she had a message for the Emperor's ears alone. She was almost certainly a spy, hoping to get secrets out of him in bed, but Napoleon saw her anyway, granting her an audience in his pavilion. He fended off her advances and sent her away empty-handed.

With the flotilla assembled and the army ready to go, the only remaining obstacle to the invasion was the Royal Navy, which maintained a constant blockade of the Channel ports. In spring 1805, Napoleon devised a plan to lure the navy away by sending Admiral Villeneuve and a large Franco-Spanish fleet to attack British interests in the West Indies. He reasoned that the Royal Navy would have to abandon its blockade and follow, rather than see

Britain's sugar islands captured by the French. He himself added to the deception by embarking on a tour of Italy to lull the British into a false sense of security. He returned secretly in July and headed back to Boulogne on 3 August to launch the invasion -- only to discover the Royal Navy blockade still in place.

Undaunted, Napoleon pinned his hopes on Villeneuve's return from the West Indies. At 3am on 21 August, apparently under the impression that Villeneuve's fleet would appear with the dawn to protect his flotilla from the Royal Navy, Napoleon gave the order for the invasion to proceed. His step-daughter Hortense was at a military ball when word came for officers to rejoin their units at once and embark the landing craft. She followed as they galloped through the night to Boulogne. "I myself felt overcome with an inexpressible emotion at the idea that such a momentous event was happening before my eyes. I already imagined that I was witnessing the naval battle and seeing our vessels plunge into the watery deep. I trembled at the thought."

In the event, though, Villeneuve's ships did not appear at dawn and Napoleon cancelled the invasion, declaring that it had all been just a training exercise. His troops were outraged as they disembarked and trudged back to camp. Many had sold their watches so as to have spending money in London.

**Fortune smiles on Britain**

A few days later, Napoleon paraded his troops again and gave them some astonishing news. Alarmed at Napoleon's annexation of territory during his Italian tour, and funded with English gold, the Austrians had declared war on France. They had invaded Bavaria, where they intended to link up with the Russian army and attack France across the Rhine.

Napoleon responded at once. Leaving 25,000 troops behind to keep the English guessing, he ordered the rest to march to the Rhine immediately. The Grande Armée left within hours, hurrying across France at breakneck speed. They took the Austrians by surprise, defeating them first at Ulm, then decisively at Austerlitz. Napoleon had intended to double back thereafter and renew his attack on Britain, but Villeneuve's fleet had ceased to exist by then, destroyed at Trafalgar. Britain was safe from invasion, but Napoleon reigned supreme in Europe. The war dragged on for another 10 years. **II**

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# TRAFALGAR

It was a day of victory on 21 October 1805, when Napoleon's plan of a meeting battle was thwarted. The British fleet, led by Vice Admiral Lord Nelson, decisively defeated the French and Spanish fleets.

In his 1836 painting, Clarkson Stanfield (who was at sea from 1808–16) imagines Trafalgar





## 30 THE BATTLE

60 British, French and Spanish warships.  
**Tim Clayton** reveals how it unfolded

## 34 THE SAILORS

**Peter Hore** takes a look at the Trafalgar  
men and women, from the 18th-century  
sailors to the modern-day crew

## 37 THE CONSEQUENCES

It was a huge relief for a nation that had  
nearly been defeated. But what would  
what would Trafalgar mean for the future  
of Britain, asks **Andrew Lambert**?

# TRAFALGAR THE BATTLE

Nelson spent 10 months hunting the French fleet. Now, as it left Cádiz, he had his chance to destroy forever Napoleon's hopes of invading Britain. **Tim Clayton** describes the dramatic clash between the two fleets when the tide turned in 1805



this dramatic painting of the battle shows



**T**rafalgar was fought against a background of fear. An eight-year struggle with Revolutionary France had ended in 1802 but war had broken out again in 1803. The

undefeated French general Napoleon Bonaparte had been building up forces and constructing barges on the Channel coast. Spain reluctantly entered the war as an ally of France late in 1804. By spring 1805 Napoleon, newly crowned emperor, had his Armée d'Angleterre poised for conquest. He launched an elaborate plan to lure British ships to the West Indies before massing his fleet in the Channel. The admiral entrusted with the operation, Pierre Villeneuve, succeeded in losing Nelson, then fought an inconclusive battle with a British squadron sent to intercept him off northern Spain.

Judging his ships too frail to continue on to Boulogne where Napoleon was waiting impatiently, Villeneuve fell back on Vigo and then to the Spanish naval base of Cádiz, a strongly fortified harbour where the fleet might be refitted. His decision was influenced by Admiral Gravina, his more experienced Spanish colleague, who had secret orders forbidding him from taking part in an invasion of Britain. Furious at the admiral's failure to appear, Napoleon decided to strike instead against the Austrians and Russians who had made an alliance with Britain. In late August he commenced a lightning march that culminated in the tremendous French victory at Austerlitz on 2 December.

By 28 September, when Nelson took command of the British fleet blockading Cádiz, the threat of immediate invasion no longer existed. Villeneuve's fleet received new orders to sail into the Mediterranean. Even at Cádiz men and supplies were hard to find and it was October before the ships were ready to leave. Villeneuve knew that Napoleon was displeased with him and rumours of his imminent replacement had reached the press. However, the Spanish view and that of the French officers was to wait behind the defences of Cádiz, until bad weather provided an opportunity to put to sea without fighting.

### Watching and waiting

Nelson withdrew his fleet towards the Portuguese coast, leaving an advance squadron of frigates to watch Cádiz, and a chain of ships to pass their signals to him. Nelson expected the French and Spanish fleet to come out when the weather broke and urged maximum vigilance. If there was to be a battle, he had a plan and he explained it to all his captains over dinner on 29 and 30 September.



Battle map of Nelson's advance towards the Combined Fleet at Trafalgar, by publisher John Fa rburn, 1805

**Nelson would actually break the line close to the centre, where he expected the enemy admiral to be**

Battle tactics of the 150 years prior to Trafalgar concentrated on 'the line'. Ships of the line, large warships well-armed with guns down each side but vulnerable on bow and stern, would be arranged in line to stand and fight the enemy's line by firing broadsides. Breaking the enemy's line was becoming a standard British tactic. In the simplified version of Nelson's plan employed on the day, the fleet fought in two divisions, one under Nelson, the other under Collingwood.

Collingwood was at liberty to direct his own ships within the guidelines of the general plan. The divisions would approach in column in order to conceal the point of attack. To further confuse the enemy Nelson would probably steer for the foremost enemy ships. Then, using a signal created for the occasion, he would instruct Collingwood to manoeuvre into line abreast to attack the rear 12 ships of the enemy line. Each ship would seek to pass the stern of its opponent, raking her and then engaging from the leeward (the side furthest from the wind).

Having led the enemy vanguard (or van, ships at the front of the line) to expect an attack, Nelson would actually break the line close to the centre, where he expected the enemy admiral to be. He had powerful three-deckers massed at the front of his line. Collingwood's leading ships were also heavily armed. Together, Nelson and

Collingwood would destroy the centre and rear of the enemy before the van could intervene to save them.

These complex evolutions would show off the skill of the British seamen, while employing it to devastating effect. To minimise the time during which the approaching ships took enemy fire without being able to reply, the British would attack under full sail. Everything would be done at top speed.

### The race to engage the enemy

On 2 October Nelson sent six of his best ships to Gibraltar for supplies. This proved the catalyst. Villeneuve's latest information told him that Nelson had only 21 ships, giving the Franco-Spanish 33 an advantage that might be enough to balance their inferior training. With his honour impugned by accusations of cowardice and a hint from his friend Marine Minister Decrès that he should act fast, Villeneuve put to sea before his replacement arrived from Paris.

Warned by his scouts, Nelson raced towards the Strait of Gibraltar, reaching it well ahead of the enemy whose favourable wind had faded away. The next day was rough, but the British frigates maintained contact while the fleet moved out to sea.

At dawn on 21 October the British saw the Combined Fleet 11 miles away, approaching Cape Trafalgar and still heading for the Strait. During the night the wind had dropped away to almost nothing, and Nelson's plan became much more dangerous, his ships advancing at walking pace being vulnerable to enemy fire for much longer. Nelson weighed up the odds, reckoning the westerly swell and the smoke of their own guns would reduce the accuracy of enemy gunnery.

The country wanted an annihilating victory; Admiral Calder, who had fought Villeneuve in July, was court martialled for not pressing home his attack. Nelson

decided he must fight. It was apparent to all that the leading ships would inevitably take heavy punishment. Nelson and Collingwood both chose to lead their divisions, setting an example to any captains who might now think that the plan had become too hazardous.

Villeneuve anticipated that Nelson would attempt to break his line in more than one place and isolate groups of ships. He ordered 21 ships – to match Nelson's strength – to form a defensive line of battle in close order, to absorb the shock of Nelson's attack.

Admiral Gravina, with 12 of the best ships, was to intervene wherever he thought most effective. With a shortage of skilled seamen and a surfeit of good soldiers Villeneuve intended to fight at even closer quarters than Nelson. His men had been trained to clear enemy decks and then board, turning the sea battle into a land battle. In this manner, in a classical precedent, Rome had famously defeated the superior seamen of Carthage.

Villeneuve's first disquieting observation was that Nelson had 26 ships, not the 21 he had hoped for. One more, *Africa*, was approaching from the north, having got lost during the night. For tight manoeuvre lack of wind was even more of a problem for his own inexperienced seamen than it was for the British. The ships had great difficulty getting to their place in the line: there were gaps and overlaps.

Seeing Nelson apparently threatening his rear, Villeneuve ordered the fleet to veer round, so that it now faced towards Cadiz. This created even more confusion in the line, especially in what was now the rear, where Gravina's freedom to act was compromised by the entanglement of his ships with the rear of the line of battle. Gravina may have sought to use one of his two squadrons to



A depiction of the battle by Nicholas Pocock, a former sailor who devoted much of his artistic career to painting naval scenes

extend the line to match Nelson's while doubling up with the second, but the result was so confused that it is difficult to work out what he had in mind

### The advance into battle

Once Villeneuve had reversed order, Collingwood found himself, as intended, opposite the enemy rear. Realising that in very light wind the dramatic showpiece

**Nelson and Collingwood both led their divisions, setting an example to any captains who thought the plan was too hazardous**

evolution into line abreast was impossible, Collingwood signalled his captains to form a line of bearing, effectively producing a diagonal row of ships facing forwards. It was a very ragged line: the ships approached in groups, moving as fast as they could. Slower ships were left behind, while one or two may not have been moving quite so swiftly as they should.

As Collingwood raced ahead, Nelson led his roughly formed column towards the enemy van. Most crews took some form of early lunch. At 11.45 with Collingwood's *Royal Sovereign* within close range, Villeneuve ordered his ships to open fire and hoisted his flag, finally revealing his position. Collingwood's leading ships took heavy fire as they came in.

Nelson continued to steer towards Admiral Dumanoir, commander of the Franco-Spanish van. Some time after his own ship came under fire he replied with his starboard (the right side looking forward) broadside, then he turned his ship towards Villeneuve's and sailed down the enemy line towards him, gradually closing with it. Successive British ships, including the approaching *Africa* maintained Dumanoir's impression that he was under attack.

Soon after midday Collingwood broke the line and took on the Spanish three-decker *Santa Ana*. Since this was not the 12th but the 16th ship from the rear, he gave the captains following a tougher task than had been intended. *Belleisle* broke through and was surrounded by several ships. *Mars* was prevented from breaking the line and then disabled by France's *Pluton*, her captain killed. But the leading ships held out. Eventually, as more British ships joined the untidy melee, they overwhelmed the enemy, capturing or driving off the French and Spanish ships.

## THE BATTLE Hour by hour

### 6.00 am

At dawn the British see the enemy fleet 11 miles away. Nelson signals his ships to form in column and sail first east north east then east.

### 8.45 am

Villeneuve, commander of the French and Spanish Combined Fleet, has countered the threat to his rear by reversing direction. Collingwood signals to get into a line of bearing since lack of wind will stop them forming line abreast later. Nelson heads towards the enemy van, concealing his final point of attack.

### 11.45 am

Villeneuve hoists his flag and orders his ships to open fire. As *Victory* comes under fire she replies and then changes course to starboard, running down the enemy line towards the centre. Unable to see through the smoke, Dumanoir, Villeneuve's second-in-command, assumes the assault is still directed at him.

### 12.10 pm

Collingwood's *Royal Sovereign* breaks the line astern of Spain's *Santa Ana*. Admiral Collingwood has broken the line too far forward, giving his ships more opponents than Nelson intended.

### 12.45 pm

*Victory* passes the stern of France's *Bucentaure* and collides with her *Redoutable*, punching a hole that is exploited by Britain's *Neptune* and the ships following. In a neat manoeuvre *Neptune*, *Leviathan* and *Conqueror* deliver successive raking broadsides through *Bucentaure's* stern.

### 1.15 pm

Nelson is shot by a musketeer on *Redoutable* and is carried below mortally wounded. The French crew masses on deck to storm aboard *Victory*, but the British *Téméraire*, out of control, collides with *Redoutable*. Grape and cannon fire from her carronades and 18-pounders massacre the French crew.



Nelson's ship *Victory* had taken severe casualties and was barely under control when she passed the French flagship *Bucentaure* and collided with *Redoutable*, punching a hole in the line. *Neptune* led *Leviathan* and *Conqueror* through the gap and they completed the destruction of the French flagship and the mighty Spanish *Santísima Trinidad*. The battle between *Victory* and *Redoutable* was typical of several close fights. *Redoutable*'s men cleared *Victory*'s decks with grenades and small arms fire. Nelson was one of the last officers to fall; unlike luckier colleagues, he was fatally wounded. A ball fired from the mizen top lodged in his spine and for three hours he lay dying, his lungs filling with blood.

Having cleared *Victory*'s top deck, *Redoutable*'s crew massed to board but at that moment the British ship *Téméraire* crashed into *Redoutable*'s other side; a volley from her 32-pounder carronades massacred the French crew. Dumanoir turned his ships too late. In the light winds they had great difficulty going about. Those that tried to save their admiral were cut off and defeated. Dumanoir sheered off towards Gibraltar, while the wounded Gravina led those ships that could escape back to Cádiz. Towards sunset the French ship *Achille* blew up, bringing the battle to a close.

Collingwood now commanded 44 ships, many riddled with holes and with no masts. He had 10,000 prisoners, many wounded. A strengthening wind was blowing towards a rocky shore and the barometer was plummeting. Nelson had ordered the ships to anchor but Collingwood cancelled this. By morning they were strung out in deteriorating weather. In the afternoon one prize sank and one drove ashore. Three French ships were recaptured and several Spanish ships headed for Cádiz, British prize crews combining with the Spanish or French to keep the ships afloat.

## A BRITISH VICTORY

### Skilled crew

The main reason the British won was the superior training and discipline of crews. They had been at sea for years and most had been together in the same ship for at least two. They knew their drills and worked as a team. French and Spanish ships had recent experience at sea and in battle, but some Spanish ships had inexperienced crews who had only served together for a few weeks. British ships had skilled seamen to make the corrections to speed and direction that enabled the ship to manoeuvre into an advantageous position. Nearly every duel involving manoeuvre was won by the British. The sole clear exception was the French *Pluton*'s victory over *Mars*.

Having got into a position where more guns could be brought to bear, British gunnery was more effective. The rate of fire of most British crews was probably superior and they had technical advantages. The casting of their guns and quality of powder were better. Fewer guns blew up and shot went faster. Most British ships were heavily armed compared with opponents. The replacement of long guns with heavy-calibre carronades on the quarterdeck, poop and forecastle of British ships gave them a great advantage in close-range killing power. Finally, despite the weather, Nelson's plan worked. Dumanoir was confused and the centre and rear were overwhelmed before the van could intervene.

On 23 October the French and Spanish sallied from Cádiz and recovered *Santa Ana* and *Neptuno*. *Algésiras*, *Aigle* and *Bucentaure* also escaped, though *Bucentaure* was wrecked off Cádiz. Collingwood took the ships he had with him north to meet them, but they returned to Cádiz. That night in Cádiz Bay fierce gusts of winds dismasted three ships and drove two ashore. Collingwood feared that more prizes might escape. Most of the ships were now in relatively safe open water to the north of Cádiz but some were anchored dangerously close to the shore south of Chipiona. Collingwood decided to take the men off the remaining prizes and then sink them. British crews went out in boats in towering seas to take their erstwhile enemies from ships that were, in several cases, just about to founder.

The storm reached its height on the night of 24 October and continued at fearsome intensity for more than 24 hours. The French *Indomptable* sank in Cádiz Bay with around 1,000 drowned. Five more ships were wrecked on shore.

The storm caused almost as many deaths as the battle. The Britons who survived the wreck of their prize were treated with generosity by the local population, who were shocked by the scale of the disaster and grateful to the British for their efforts in saving lives. The Spanish predicted the destruction of the British fleet. It is a tribute to British seamanship that none of these ships foundered. In the end the British brought four badly damaged prizes into Gibraltar, but the storm completed the work of the battle and the enemy fleet was more or less destroyed. ■

Tim Clayton co-authored, with Phil Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2004). His latest book is *This Dark Business: The Secret War Against Napoleon* (Little, Brown, 2018)

### 1.30 pm

Most of *Bucentaure*'s guns have been knocked over or masked by fallen rigging. Villeneuve signals to his van ships to turn round. He tries to sail from danger but the ship will not respond. He finds all the boats shattered by shot. He surrenders a quarter of an hour later.

### 1.45 pm

Dumanoir finally orders his ships to turn back. In the light winds they have difficulty reversing direction and it is half an hour before Captain Hardy on *Victory* responds with a signal to Nelson's ships to come to the wind on the port tack.

### 2.20 pm

About this time enemy ships *Santísima Trinidad*, *Redoutable*, *Fougueux*, *Santa Ana*, *Algésiras* and *Monarca* all surrender. The battle in the centre is clearly going in favour of the British. Admiral Gravina, who leads the Spanish fleet, is wounded.

### 3.00 pm

*Belleisle*, the only British ship in serious danger of defeat, is rescued. *Argonauta* (Spanish), *Swiftsure* (French), and *Bahama* (Spanish) surrender. The area to the rear of centre is collapsing.

### 4.30 pm

Another six ships have surrendered. Dumanoir ceases fire and steers away towards the Straits of Gibraltar; Gravina hoists signal for ships to follow him and makes for Cádiz. According to *Victory*'s log this was when Nelson died.

### 5.30 pm

*Intrépide* (French) and *Neptuno* (Spanish) have surrendered. France's *Achille* blows up.

# TRAFALGAR THE SAILORS

More than 18,000 officers, seamen and marines fought for the British at Trafalgar. The Ayshford Trafalgar Roll has revealed some fascinating details about the men who accompanied Nelson into battle, says **Peter Hore**

Overend's 1864 lithograph  
imagines the Victory, with  
Nelson surrounded by his men,  
during the battle of Trafalgar





**F**or more than 20 years researchers Pam and Derek Ayshford collected information about the men who fought at Trafalgar: the Ayshford Trafalgar Roll

they created contains 21,540 names from the muster books of the British ships off Cádiz on 21 October 1805.

Details recorded in the roll (now owned by the 1805 Club and available online at [ageofnelson.org](http://ageofnelson.org)) include the ship on which each man served, his rank or rating, and in most cases his age and place of birth. Where the documents survive other details may include family background, former trades, pensions, awards, medals, physical descriptions, pictures, injuries sustained, illnesses and date of death. Because some men had been discharged before the battle or were absent on other duties, the actual number of men at the battle on 21 October 1805 is 15,558 officers and sailors and 2,867 marines.

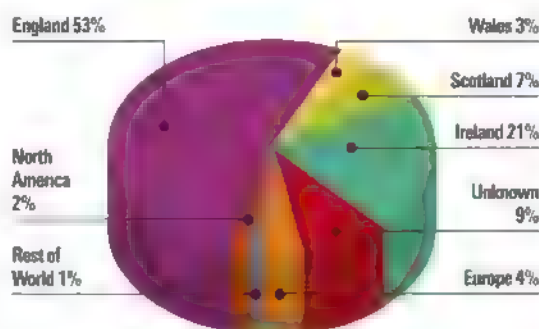
Pam and Derek Ayshford consulted not just the obvious sources at the National Archives in Kew, but surviving records held at the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth, the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, and the Royal Marines Museum. The largest number of men, a little more than a half, came from England. Of these, 1,280 came from London, reflecting the dominant role of the city and the Thames as a port, a trading centre and the capital of a bustling commercial empire.

Next most significant in England were the ports of north and south Devon (1,115). Then came Lancashire (631), Gloucestershire (531), Cornwall (499), Kent (486), Hampshire (482) and Somerset (461). These figures, of course, reflect the location of large ports including Liverpool, Chatham, Portsmouth and Bristol, and, in the case of Gloucester and Somerset, good recruiting grounds for marines.

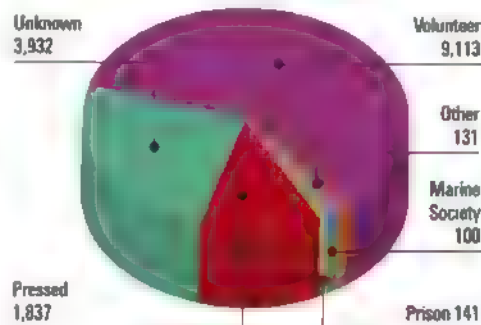
About a fifth of the men came from Ireland, which, of course, had entered the union in 1801. The major recruiting centres were, as in England, ports, including Dublin (981) and Cork (789). About one tenth of the men came from Wales and Scotland, which in terms of their 19th-century populations seem to have been under-represented in the fleet. However, the Scottish diaspora was already under way and there were more Stewarts from the ports of England than from Scotland itself.

About one in 21 men in the British ships were foreign born, though their nationality must be treated with caution. For example,

**Where did they come from?**  
The roll examines the origins of the seamen at the battle – many came from large ports such as London and Portsmouth



**What kind of men were they?**  
Most ordinary and able seamen at the battle had joined the Navy as volunteers but a tenth had been forced into service



the Italian-sounding name of 23-year-old private Petro Calerisi in the 64-gun *Africa* and his description when he first joined as “dark complexion and brown eyes” probably indicates that he was, as he claimed, from Sardinia. On the other hand 31-year-old landsman William Morris, who was wounded while the 74 gun *Ajax* fought the French *Intrépide*, gave his place of birth as Mexico, though from his name he was neither of Spanish nor of indigenous descent. Much is made by some commentators that there were 68 Frenchmen on the British side at Trafalgar. However, close study of the Ayshford Trafalgar Roll shows that many apparently French men had undoubtedly English names, while others had their names anglicised by 19th-century ship’s clerks.

For example, 25-year-old John Rawlins, a pressed man, who gave his place of birth as France, had spent several years in the Navy, made a generous allotment to his wife Betsey who lived at 18 George Street, in London, and was presumably a thoroughbred Englishman.

What are we to make of Landsman Pierre Pellerin, 22 years old at the battle, where he lost his right arm at the shoulder joint, in *Mars*? He was born at Versailles, his parents were the French-sounding Nicolas and Jeanette Pellerin, but young Pierre joined the Royal Navy in Ferrol, northern Spain, never returned to France after 1804 and was living in England as a naval pensioner in the late 1840s when he claimed his naval general service medal with Trafalgar clasp. And while some Frenchmen were discharged to a prison ship before the battle, others like Jean Baptisto and Jaque (sic) Brett were clearly deserters who had taken refuge in British ships.

There are 473 men from the United States of America and 53 from Canada in the muster books, but these were new-fangled political concepts in 1805 and a shipboard clerk’s idea of geography was sometimes only hazy. William Gordon Rutherford (also spelled Rutherford), though he was born in Williamsburg, North Carolina and buried in St Margaret’s, Westminster, was raised at his family home in Edinburgh and educated at St Andrew’s University, and would undoubtedly have considered himself a north Briton, that is, a Scotsman.

The 18-year-old midshipman Richard Bulkeley’s place of birth is simply given as America. He was one of the last people to speak to the dying Nelson and to whom the admiral replied “Remember me to your

**Most men were volunteers in the Royal Navy for the pay, for three square meals a day and the chance of prize money**

## BRITISH COMBATANTS AT TRAFALGAR

Men of all ages and backgrounds fought in the battle

### 27 YEARS AT SEA

#### Bosun John Bunt, *Mars*

John Bunt was born in Lanteglos, Cornwall, in 1770 and joined the sloop *Childers* as a volunteer in 1789 where he was rated able seaman, so presumably had already spent some years at sea. At Lord Howe's victory over the French on the Glorious First of June in 1794, John was a bosun's mate in *Ranger*. Later *Ranger* was captured off Brest and John spent three years as a prisoner. When exchanged under a cartel, he was recruited into Sir Edward Pellew's *Indefatigable*. In 1798 the Navy Board gave John his warrant as bosun, and he served in several ships until he joined *Mars* on 19 March 1803. As one of *Mars*' standing officers he saw action at

Trafalgar, at Rochefort under Sir Samuel Hood and at Copenhagen in 1807 under Lord Gambier.

In 1810 John became bosun of *Victory* where he lived until 1816 with Eliza Hudson and where their first child was born in 1813. John and Eliza married in 1816 and the family took passage to Trincomalee. Eliza gave birth to a son off the Cape of Good Hope on 29 December 1816 and his name was entered in Minden's muster roll as John Hope Bunt. John senior's appointment as bosun of the dockyard in Ceylon only lasted a year for he died in 1817, after 27 years' Navy service. His widow returned home with her two small children

### BROTHERS-IN-LAW, AND IN WAR

#### William Willmet and James Poad, *Victory*

William Willmet (other spellings of his name exist) joined *Victory* from Captain Israel (brother of Edward) Pellew's 74-gun *Conqueror* on 28 March 1805. Not much is known about his background but he was a Devon man and evidently well-regarded to be made bosun of Nelson's flagship. He was wounded in the leg at the battle, but returned to duty on 5 November.

William had married Betsy Poad of Plymouth just before he was made bosun of *Conqueror*. He took to sea with his young brother-in-law, James Poad, as boy third class in 1804. William had sufficient influence that when he was moved into *Victory*, he was able to take James with him, rated midshipman. Both were in *Victory* during Nelson's pursuit of the Combined fleet to the West Indies and back. James was the youngest midshipman on board (there were a dozen boys

and volunteers younger than him) and he was chosen to carry a banner at Nelson's funeral in St Paul's on 9 January 1806.

Afterwards James served in various ships as master's mate and acting lieutenant until he passed his lieutenant's examination in 1812. He was one of the fortunate officers who found employment in the Navy after the 1793–1815 wars ended. In 1830 he was wrecked off Sicily while employed by the Office of the Agent for Transports, in a ship carrying 320 men of the 90th regiment and 40 women and children, who were all safely landed. In 1837 he commanded the semaphore station on Haste Hill, Haslemere, and from 1841–48 at Pewley Hill outside Guildford. When the Crimean War broke out in 1854, he got a commission as recruiting officer. He was promoted to commander in 1855 and died at Hackney, London, in 1858.

### THE 60-YEAR-OLD AND HIS SON

#### Thomas and Francis Price, *Téméraire*

Thomas Price was born in Liverpool about 1745. He went to sea as a boy and served the Royal Navy for the rest of his life. By 1780 he held his master's warrant, responsible for sailing and piloting his ship, and served as master in increasingly larger ships until, in 1803, he was appointed to Captain Harvey's *Téméraire*. As British columns closed on the Combined Fleet at Trafalgar, Neeson had to shout to Harvey (and to Thomas who would have been conning the ship) "I'll thank you to keep your station". Thomas at 60 was one of the oldest men at the battle. Later he became decrepit with "stones and gavel, poor eyesight and old age". Nevertheless he was master of yacht *Princess Augusta* when he died and was buried at sea aged 70.

His son Francis Swaine Price was also in *Téméraire*, serving his father as master's mate. Francis went to sea with his father aged eight or nine in 1794. He was wounded three times: during an attack on some Spanish ships in Aix Roads in 1799, again while cutting out a Spanish gunboat at Corunna, and at Trafalgar when he was so badly injured his father took leave to nurse him. Francis passed for lieutenant in 1806 but only served one more year at sea before he retired to Cornwall to raise 12 children. He became harbourmaster and played a large part in the export of china clay from Pentewan. Promoted to commander in 1839, he died in 1853.

Naval General Service Medals of the kind issued in 1849 to those still living who had fought at Trafalgar and other battles from 1793 to 1840



father": his father was a loyalist whose family first fled to Nova Scotia before settling down in Hereford.

It is wrong to think that the men in Nelson's fleet were there against their will. In the whole fleet there were only 1,837 pressed men or about one in ten. The figure might be slightly low because men taken by the press gangs were often then given the chance to volunteer, in which case they became entitled to a bounty. However, the overwhelming number of men were volunteers: these men were in the Royal Navy for

the pay, for the three square meals a day and the chance of prize money.

The youngest person at the battle was eight-year-old boy third class William Wilcott in *Neptune*, and there were also three nine-year-olds. The possibility exists that one of these, Joseph Ozdley, also in *Neptune*, born at sea, had been at sea for most of his life. The oldest man at the battle was 67-year-old purser William Burke, whose memorial at All Saints', Wouldham, Kent records that "in his arms the immortal Nelson died".

The Ayshford Trafalgar Roll gives the student, the historian and genealogist access to more information about the men who fought at the battle of Trafalgar, and in finer detail, than has been possible before. It is an important research tool and its exploitation reveals a great deal more about Nelson's navy and the individuals who served in it. **M**

Captain Peter Hore is a naval strategist, historian, biographer and obituarist. He is editor of the *Trafalgar Chronicle* and chief correspondent of the *Warships International Fleet Review*.



# TRAFALGAR

## THE CONSEQUENCES

Britain's victory was not only a superb naval achievement, says **Andrew Lambert**, but a pivotal event with effects that would be felt long after the smoke of battle had cleared

**T**rafalgar was a truly decisive battle. The French and Spanish had been crushed; their ships were lost, their alliance destroyed and their morale annihilated. France and Spain would never forget Trafalgar, nor could Napoleon's naval forces recover.

Trafalgar was the coda to Nelson's achievement. He had already destroyed Napoleon's strategy and his invasion plans by pursuing Villeneuve to the West Indies, while his intelligence set up Calder's battle off Cape Finisterre, blocking the French attempt to enter the Channel. This was the province of genius. Others could have won on 21 October, although perhaps not as successfully, but only Nelson had the insight to see into the enemy's mind, and annihilate its strategy.

Trafalgar destroyed Napoleon's naval power, exposing the unreality of his threat to invade Britain – a device used to keep the British on the defensive, and out of Europe. Going forward, Britain would take the strategic initiative. Trafalgar secured Britain's command of the sea; trade and empire allowed it to prosper, creating the wealth to fund a total war of economic endurance. However, the fruits of Trafalgar would take a decade to harvest. Napoleon still dominated Europe and set up the

Continental System in 1806, an economic blockade excluding British trade from Europe. The British responded with a counter-blockade of Europe, which made the continent suffer the cost of French occupation, and prompted rebellion.

To maintain absolute command of the seas, naval threats were swiftly crushed. In 1807 the British removed two potential threats to their sovereignty of the seas with clinical precision. The entire Danish Navy was captured and taken away in September 1807, and two months later the Portuguese fleet, treasury and Royal family were evacuated from Lisbon to Brazil, under the nose of the invading French army. Bounded by naval might, Napoleon was unable to escape the confines of Europe, or sustain his empire.

British aid revived downtrodden peoples in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany. Trafalgar enabled Britain to survive Napoleon's stunning defeat of Austria and Russia at Austerlitz on 2 December 1805, using her control of the sea to keep Napoleon land-

locked in Europe, while offering hope to the subject peoples of his empire of tyranny. Finally the tension snapped. The Continental System proved unbearable; Spain revolted in 1808, then Russia left the system in 1811, prompting Napoleon's invasion in 1812.

Having destroyed the French fleet, the Royal Navy shifted focus. The residue of French seapower was blockaded in Brest, Toulon and Antwerp from 1805 to 1814, allowing British task forces to sweep up the last remnants of the French and Dutch overseas empires, boosting trade and ending any naval threat to shipping. British cruisers shifted to the offensive, offshore islands and convoys were captured, coastal towns attacked and the Spanish rising against the French occupation that began in Madrid on 2 May 1808 was sustained.

As Napoleon observed in 1815: "If it had not been for you English, I should have been Emperor of the East. But wherever there is water to float a ship, we are sure to find you in our way". He was beaten by European armies, notably by Russia, Prussia and Austria at Leipzig in 1813 and, supported by the British, Spanish and Portuguese effort, in the Iberian peninsula. These defeats were only possible because Britain never gave up. Napoleon was never allowed to consolidate power.

Nelson ended Napoleon's dreams of glory, and saved his nation. The events of 21 October were transformed into a legend, taking a central place in British life and culture. It cost Britain the life of her hero, the icon who sustained resistance, but his death was the final ingredient that made Trafalgar mythical. There would be no more full scale sailing battlefleet actions between first-class nations. Nor would there be any serious prospect of a fleet battle involving the Royal Navy before 1914. What nation would take on the sublime? ■

**Andrew Lambert** is Laughton Professor of Naval History at King's College London. His books include *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (Faber & Faber, 2005) and *Seapower States* (Yale, 2018)

**It secured Britain's  
command of the sea;  
trade and empire  
allowed Britain  
to prosper**

Despite securing victory at Austerlitz (below), Napoleon's hopes of expanding his empire were hindered by Britain's superiority at sea, as demonstrated at Trafalgar just weeks earlier



# Nelson

10 DAYS THAT  
CREATED A  
LEGEND

**Quintin Colville** and  
**James Davey**, curators of  
the *Nelson, Navy, Nation*  
gallery at the National  
Maritime Museum, reveal  
the moments in Horatio  
Nelson's life that propelled  
him to greatness

Horatio Nelson as depicted  
in Lemuel Francis Abbott's oil on  
canvas from 1798. By the time Nelson  
was felled by a French bullet seven  
years later, he was a global superstar





John Francis Rigaud's portrait of Nelson, begun in 1777 when he was a lieutenant. Thanks to his raw talent, and the patronage of his uncle Maurice Suckling, Nelson's rise through the ranks was rapid

9 APRIL 1777

## The ambitious teenager shows his potential

Passing the lieutenant's examination was a hurdle that everyone with ambitions to become a commissioned officer in the Royal Navy had to clear

Nelson was 18 years old when he appeared before the panel in order to be tested on diverse aspects of his service knowledge. Meeting with success, he wrote to his brother soon afterwards with the news that he had been appointed lieutenant on a frigate, the *Lowestoffe*. "So I am now left in [the] world to shift for myself," he continued, "which I hope I

shall do, so as to bring Credit to myself and Friends."

Perhaps chief among those friends was Nelson's uncle, Maurice Suckling. A captain himself, and promoted to the important position of controller of the navy in 1775, Suckling had carefully guided Nelson's youthful footsteps, finding commanding officers who would promote his advancement and broaden his operational experience. Indeed, the two ships in which Nelson began his naval service as a boy in 1771 – *Raisonnable* and *Triumph* – were both captained by Suckling

Six years later, this key supporter also sat on the board that examined Nelson for his lieutenant's commission. Patronage was, of course, part of the bedrock of 18th-century British society, and Nelson was typical of the wider officer corps in seeking to benefit from a powerful contact. However, influence was

rarely the sole basis of naval success. It was professional knowledge that the examination was designed to probe, and the patron who backed a dunderhead jeopardised his own reputation in the short or long term

**Nelson was typical of the officer corps in benefiting from a powerful contact. However, influence was rarely the sole basis of naval success**

11 MARCH 1787

## Nelson marries into wealth and respectability

The 10 years of peace that followed the American War of Independence put Nelson's naval career on hold. In 1787 he married Frances 'Fanny' Nisbet, a young widow from a wealthy plantation family on Nevis, one of the Leeward Islands. Contemporaries described her as pretty and artistic, though intellectually unremarkable. Prince William Henry, the future William IV and a fellow naval officer, gave the bride away. Privately, the prince wrote more critically to Samuel Hood, saying "poor Nelson is over head and ears in love... I wish him well and happy, and that he may not repent the step he has taken".

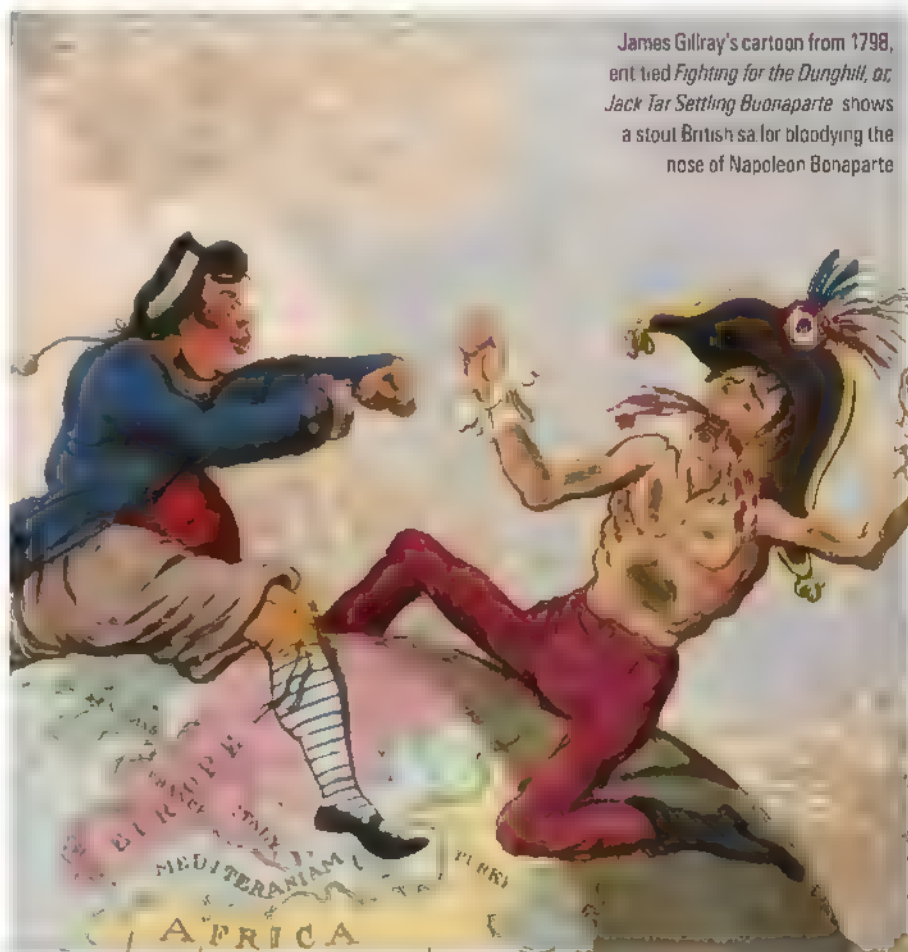
Contrary to much subsequent opinion, the marriage was for many years a happy one. With Nelson often away at sea for long periods, the couple corresponded frequently, the letters showing an affectionate, if formal, relationship. The marriage was a good match for Nelson. Still young, without prize money and relatively unknown, it brought him a degree of respectability. It also offered the prospect of substantial wealth, for Frances stood to inherit a significant estate from her uncle.

The newlywed couple spent the next five years in England, with Nelson periodically – and unsuccessfully – petitioning the Admiralty for a command. With the navy reduced to a minimum footing, there were too few active ships for even a promising naval officer. Residing over a hundred miles from London, in Norfolk, and seemingly forgotten by the naval establishment, he lived the life of a country gentleman, waiting for his opportunity.

A miniature of Lady Nelson by Daniel Orme, 1798. Frances and Horatio were happily married for many years.



Nelson's career was seemingly going nowhere – but then, all of a sudden, the deteriorating relationship between Britain and France transformed his prospects.



James Gillray's cartoon from 1798, entitled *Fighting for the Dunghill, or, Jack Tar Settling Buonaparte* shows a stout British sailor bloodying the nose of Napoleon Bonaparte.

NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, LONDON

1 FEBRUARY 1793

## Nelson goes to war with the French

More than any other event, the outbreak of war between Britain and France changed Nelson's life. His career was seemingly going nowhere – but then, all of a sudden, the deteriorating relationship between the two nations transformed his prospects.

Since the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, Britain had watched nervously as the political regime grew more extreme, and revolutionary armies marched across Europe. The French invasion of the Low Countries in late 1792 and the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 heightened British fears.

As the two nations edged closer to war, the British government began to mobilise its navy in preparation, and on 6 January 1793

Nelson was given command of the 64-gun ship *Agamemnon*.

On 1 February 1793, France declared war on Britain, a turn of events that would be the making of Horatio Nelson. He was immediately sent to the Mediterranean, where he learnt from one of the most able commanders in the fleet, Lord Hood. In the following years, he saw service across the Mediterranean, and won a reputation as a promising officer. He was given his first independent squadron command, blockading the French and Italian coast, and supporting the Austrian army.

Nelson also secured the attention of Admiral Sir John Jervis, commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean fleet. Then, in April 1796, Jervis promoted him to commodore. In the following years, in the crucible of war, Nelson would go from being one of many hundreds of ambitious officers, to the nation's greatest admiral.



14 FEBRUARY 1797

## A high-risk manoeuvre pays spectacular dividends

Nelson's actions at the battle of Cape St Vincent saw him catapulted onto the national stage for the first time

On 14 February 1797, Sir John Jervis intercepted a Spanish fleet off the coast of southern Portugal. Nelson recognised that Jervis's expansive tactical manoeuvre could not be completed, and that the enemy fleet would soon escape. He took his ship, the *Captain*, out of the line of battle and attacked the leading Spanish ships, closely followed by *Culloden*, under the command of his friend and rival Thomas Troubridge. An intense fight ensued; amid the broadsides, Nelson's ship came alongside the *San Nicolas*. Seizing the opportunity, Nelson launched a daring boarding attempt, which forced the ship's surrender. He then executed a successful boarding of a second

Spanish ship, the *San Josef*, which had also become entangled.

Nelson's decision to take his ship out of the line was a risky endeavour. Had the action failed, he could have faced a court-martial for disobeying orders. No one though, not least Jervis, could deny that he had played an important role in winning the battle. Of the four ships captured, two had been taken by Nelson.

Nelson took steps to ensure that his deeds would be read about across Britain. In a canny public relations exercise, he sent home his own account of the battle, which gave a dramatic description of his actions. As a result, his successes were widely reported in the press and, in recognition of his chivalry, he was made a Knight of the Bath.

Nelson receives the surrender of the *San Nicolas* at the battle of Cape St Vincent, a clash that made his name in Britain



25 JULY 1793

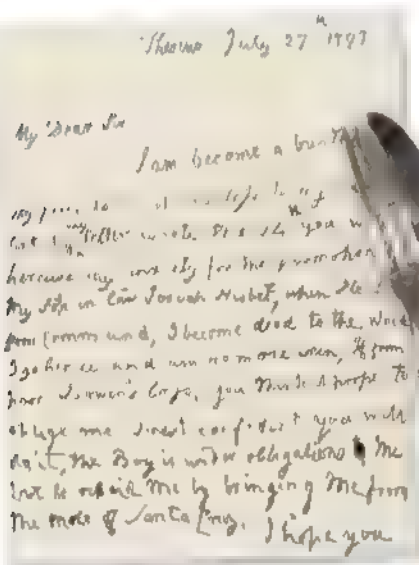
## A Spanish musket ball creates a one-armed icon

A pinned and empty sleeve is as indicative of Nelson as a hand thrust into a waistcoat's of Napoleon. However, the events that led to this instantly recognisable injury are rather less familiar. Fresh from his dazzling exploits at the battle of Cape St Vincent, Nelson was given command of a squadron and ordered to capture Spanish merchant vessels, and their cargoes of bullion, at Santa Cruz on Tenerife. The first assault was directed at the forts to the east of the town and was

a total failure. The second, led by Nelson himself, was a landing force of sailors and marines aimed at the town. It fared even worse, and the severe cost in casualties included the admiral. Nelson's right arm was shattered by a musket ball, and his life may have been saved by the actions of his stepson, Josiah Nisbet, who managed to staunch the bleeding with neckerchiefs used as tourniquets.

Back on board his flagship, *Theseus*, Nelson's arm was immediately amputated by the surgeon Thomas Eshelby on 25 July. His return to active command of the squadron was remarkably rapid, but a letter in the collections of the National Maritime Museum (pictured) – the first he wrote with his left hand – reveals the despair and self-doubt that the injury provoked in him. Addressed to his superior, Admiral Jervis, it reads. "I am become a burthen to my friends and useless to my Country," and continues "I become dead to the World I go hence and am no more seen"

The first letter that Nelson wrote with his left hand and a combined knife and fork that he used after losing his right arm



21 MAY 1798

## Disaster at sea provides a salutary lesson

Nelson's successes as a naval officer owed much to the professionalism of the institution in which he served, and his own concerted efforts to hone his knowledge and expertise. The latter involved plenty of mistakes but, crucially, he strove to learn from them.

One of the most significant was an incident in 1798, when Nelson's flagship, the *Vanguard*, was dismasted in a storm while serving in the Mediterranean. While the blame lay as much on his flag captain, Edward Berry, the incident served to highlight the questionable seamanship of both officers. *Vanguard* was towed to safety by the *Alexander*, whose captain, Alexander Ball, had reduced his sails during the storm, and so preserved his rigging.

Coming only a year after his glorious actions at Cape St Vincent, and at a time when he had recently been promoted to rear-admiral, the incident threatened to severely blot Nelson's professional reputation. He wrote a long, self-critical letter to his commanding officer, Lord St Vincent (formerly Sir John Jervis), taking full responsibility for the incident, and blaming it on his "consummate vanity". He had learned an important lesson, while higher rank provided opportunities for fame and glory, an officer neglected his duties as a seaman at his peril.

"I hope," wrote Nelson, "it has made me a better officer as I believe it has made me a better man." Just over two months later, Nelson would demonstrate this in the most dramatic manner possible.

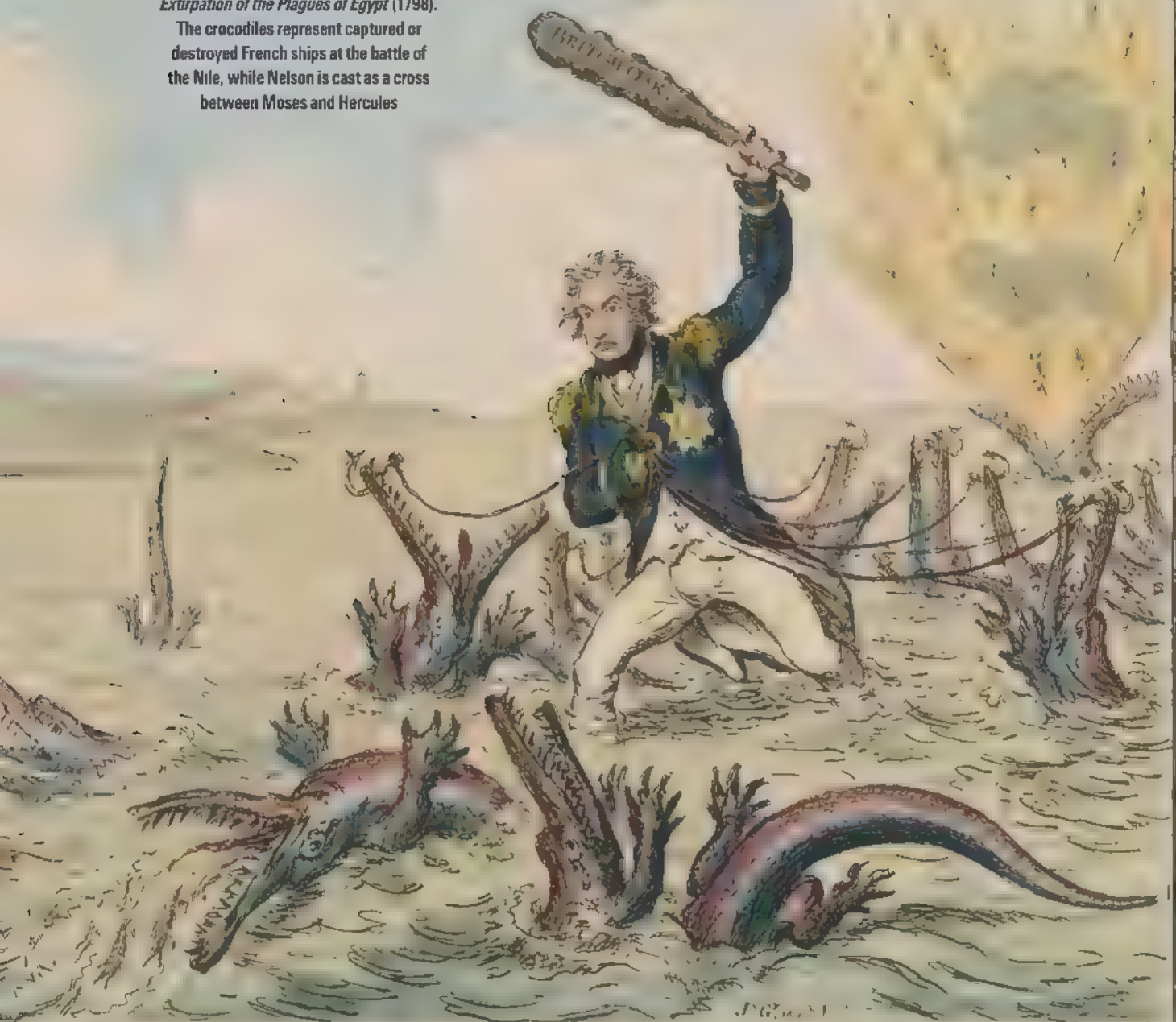
News of the battle crossed Europe: Haydn wrote the *Nelson Mass*, while the victory encouraged the formation of a second European coalition against France





Nelson stands in the Nile culling crocodiles in James Gillray's cartoon *Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt* (1798).

The crocodiles represent captured or destroyed French ships at the battle of the Nile, while Nelson is cast as a cross between Moses and Hercules



*Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt; - or - The British Hero cleansing y Mouth of y Nile*

1 AUGUST 1798

## The Nile turns a British hero into a global superstar

If the battle of Cape St Vincent had made Nelson famous, then his success at the battle of the Nile turned him into an international celebrity. After a long and frustrating search, Nelson finally tracked down a French fleet that had escaped from Toulon to Aboukir Bay in Egypt. The 13 French ships of the line that had escorted Napoleon's army to Egypt lay anchored in what they believed was a strong position across the bay.

Taking a calculated risk, Nelson ordered an attack. As the British ships approached, Captain Thomas Foley of the *Goliath* noticed that there was room on the landward side of the French line, and was followed by the next four ships. The remainder of the fleet attacked the French from the seaward side, doubling the attack on the enemy's ships by assailing them from both directions. The battle raged into the night, French ships surrendered in turn, and by the following morning 11 had capitulated or been destroyed. Only two ships of the line had managed to escape.

The battle of the Nile was Nelson's most decisive victory. French naval

power had been virtually removed from the Mediterranean, while Napoleon's army was left stranded in Egypt. News of the battle crossed Europe. Haydn wrote the *Nelson Mass*, while the victory encouraged the formation of a second European coalition against France. The triumph was celebrated across Britain, where a vast

array of commemorative material ranging from ribbons and piques to domestic furnishings hailed Horatio Nelson's achievements.



This silver cup was presented to Nelson following his victory at the battle of the Nile.

George Romney's portrait of Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, in the 1780s. Her affair with Nelson proved something of a stumbling block to writers wishing to cast Britain's great naval hero as a paragon of Christian virtue.



NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, LONDON

22 SEPTEMBER 1798

## Nelson embarks on his great love affair

Nelson had encountered Lady Hamilton once before. Ordered to Naples in the summer of 1793, the then little-known captain of the *Agamemnon* was entertained at the residence of the British minister, William Hamilton, and his glamorous wife. By then, Emma Hamilton already enjoyed European fame as an artist's model, a singer, and a star for her 'attitudes' neoclassical tableaux vivants that she performed to immense acclaim.

The 35-year-old officer was doubtless flattered by her company. A great deal had changed in the interval before their second encounter in 1798. As victor of the Nile, Nelson was now at the centre of the national and international stage himself. Emma realised

that, following the crushing defeat of the French fleet in Aboukir Bay, his arrival in Naples was an unprecedented opportunity to enhance her own celebrity by association. She wrote him a letter of gushing adulation: "My dress from head to foot is alla Nelson... Even my shawl is in blue with gold anchors all over. My earrings are Nelson's anchors; in short, we are be Nelsoned all over."

When Nelson's flagship, *Vanguard*, dropped anchor in Naples on 22 September, Emma Hamilton made a dramatic appearance on deck where, in Nelson's words, she "fell into my arms more dead than alive." The love affair that followed was the defining relationship of his later years and – as Nelson grew ever more cold and distant to his estranged wife, Fanny – a goldmine for caricaturists. However, for later Victorian commentators determined to find only a desire for duty and service burning in their warrior exemplars, it posed something of a challenge.



This gold betrothal ring is one of a pair exchanged by Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

**Emma made a dramatic appearance on deck where, in Nelson's words, she "fell into my arms more dead than alive"**



21 OCTOBER 1805

## Tragedy and triumph at Trafalgar

The day that cost Nelson his life was the culmination of his professional career. On 19 October, word arrived that the combined French and Spanish fleets sheltering in Cadiz harbour were putting to sea. Shortly after daybreak on the 21st, Nelson saw the enemy masts crowding the horizon. The ensuing encounter at Trafalgar was one that Nelson had been determined to engage, and which he expected as fully as possible.

Nelson perfectly understood the altered realities of war in the Napoleonic era. In his words, it was "annihilation that the Country wants, and not merely a splendid victory". His tactics – in part novel, in part adapted from precedent – were rigorously directed to that end, and had been communicated to his captains in the weeks before the battle. Nelson ordered his fleet to form two divisions. Sailing straight at the enemy line, these would smash through their formation, precipitating a close-range, pell-mell, and above all decisive engagement.

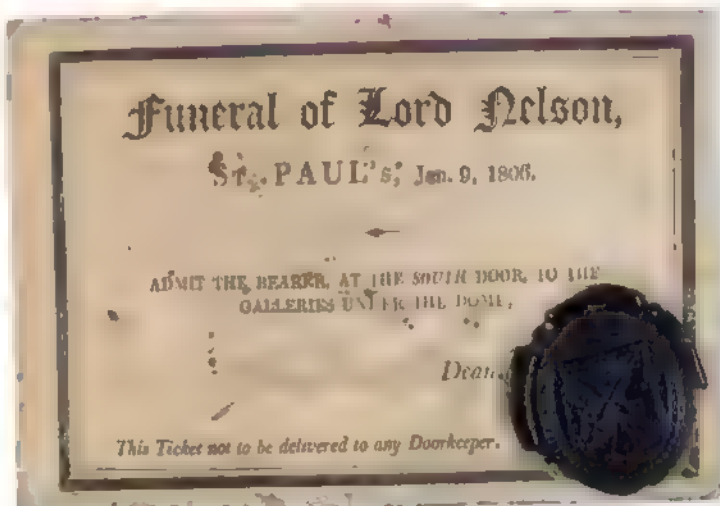
However, approaching at barely walking pace it took hours of nerve-shredding anticipation before the two forces met. Nelson spent some of that time composing a prayer in his private journal and adding a codicil to his will, petitioning the nation to provide for Emma.

When battle came, it unfolded much as he predicted. Nelson was struck by a musket ball at 1.15pm. The manner of his death later that afternoon – with triumph by then assured – might almost have been scripted by him too. The undress

uniform coat that he wore that day is a treasure in the collection of the National Maritime Museum.

The vice-admiral's undress coat worn by Nelson at the battle of Trafalgar, featuring a bullet hole on the left shoulder, close to the epaulette.

Nelson was struck by a musket ball at 1.15pm. The manner of his death later that afternoon – with triumph by then assured – might almost have been scripted by him.



A ticket to Lord Nelson's funeral at St Paul's. "You might have heard a pin fall," said Lady Bessborough of the moment the coffin appeared.

9 JANUARY 1806

## A nation venerates its fallen hero

This was a day that cemented Nelson's status as a national icon. News of Trafalgar had reached Britain in early November 1805, and jubilation at the victory was mixed with mourning for Nelson's loss. The king approved a state funeral and, on 5 January 1806, the Painted Hall at the Royal Hospital in

Greenwich was thrown open for the public to view Nelson's coffin.

On 8 January, a grand funeral procession began. Nelson's body was carried upriver in a state barge to Whitehall Stairs. Surrounded by ceremonial craft, and with thousands thronging the banks of the Thames, it was a spectacle matched only by the events of the following day.

Early that morning the coffin commenced its final journey – this time through the streets of London mounted on a funeral

carriage designed to resemble a warship. Its destination was St Paul's Cathedral, and a service crowded with politicians and dignitaries. At its climax the coffin descended into the crypt and a party of *Victory's* seamen, tasked with placing one of the ship's flags with Nelson, chose instead to tear off pieces as mementos.

With war still raging against Napoleon, it is certain that the funeral's ceremonial magnificence was stage-managed to stiffen national resolve. Nonetheless, it also revealed the wide and unforced social resonance of Nelson's life and achievements. As Lady Bessborough recalled: "The moment the Car appear'd which bore the body, you might have heard a pin fall, and without any order to do so, they all took off their hats." **U**

Quintin Colville is a curator at Royal Museums Greenwich and visiting professor at the University of Portsmouth. James Davey is lecturer in naval and maritime history at the University of Exeter and the author of *In Nelson's Wake: The Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (Yale, 2015). They curated the gallery *Nelson, Navy, Nation* at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

# THE BATTLE FOR EUROPE

Napoleon's brother  
Joseph, king of Spain,  
flees after defeat by a  
British-led coalition of  
allies in 1813, during  
the Peninsular War





### **The battle of Austerlitz**

The crushing defeat of the Austro-Russian army is one of the greatest clashes of the Napoleonic era

### **Napoleon Bonaparte's Spanish ulcer**

This indecisive war tied up his resources in a way that meant he just couldn't get rid of

### **Childbirth and cannons**

The army wives who shared the dangers of the Peninsular War

### **An emperor humbled**

Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 was a disaster – why did he do it?

### **Britain's year of fear**

In the run-up to Waterloo, Britain's mood swung from joy to horror

### **Napoleon the 'Great'?**

Historian John Elliott believes that Bonaparte was an enlightened ruler as well as a military genius



It was a battle that proved to be one of the most decisive engagements of the Napoleonic Wars.

**Ian Castle** investigates Napoleon's crushing defeat of the Austro-Russian army, whose fate, he believes, was sealed even before the first musket shot rang out

# Austerlitz

## A QUEST FOR GLORY





**T**he battle of Austerlitz is rightly hailed as one of the greatest clashes of the Napoleonic era. Yet more than 200 years on, it is often incorrectly portrayed as a battle in

which Napoleon, as puppet-master, controlled the strategy of his opponent as well as that of his own army. A closer examination shows that the Austro-Russian allies were more than capable of sealing their own disastrous fate without needing anyone else to pull the strings.

On 20 November 1805 Emperor Napoleon rode into the Moravian city of Brünn (now Brno in the Czech Republic) at the head of a thousand cavalymen of his Imperial Guard. An onlooker watching his dramatic arrival described him as "small and corpulent... his face was pale, his look bright and wistful". From his headquarters in the city, Napoleon often appeared at the window, "where he – after he walked through the room – remained standing and observing the square".

Indeed Napoleon had much to ponder as he gazed from the window. After three months of successful campaigning he had

## **The problem facing Napoleon was his urgent need to bring the Austro-Russian army to the battlefield**

taken the surrender of an Austrian army at Ulm, cleared Bavaria of enemy troops, forced the Austrians to abandon Tirol and northern Italy and occupied Vienna as well as great tracts of Habsburg territory.

But the pursuit of General Kutuzov and his Russian army along the Danube valley had failed to corner the shrewd Russian commander and now, as autumn turned to winter, he found himself at the end of a long exposed line of communications. Having started the campaign with about 198,000 men, numerous detachments and garrisons along the way had reduced the available army encamped around Brünn to about

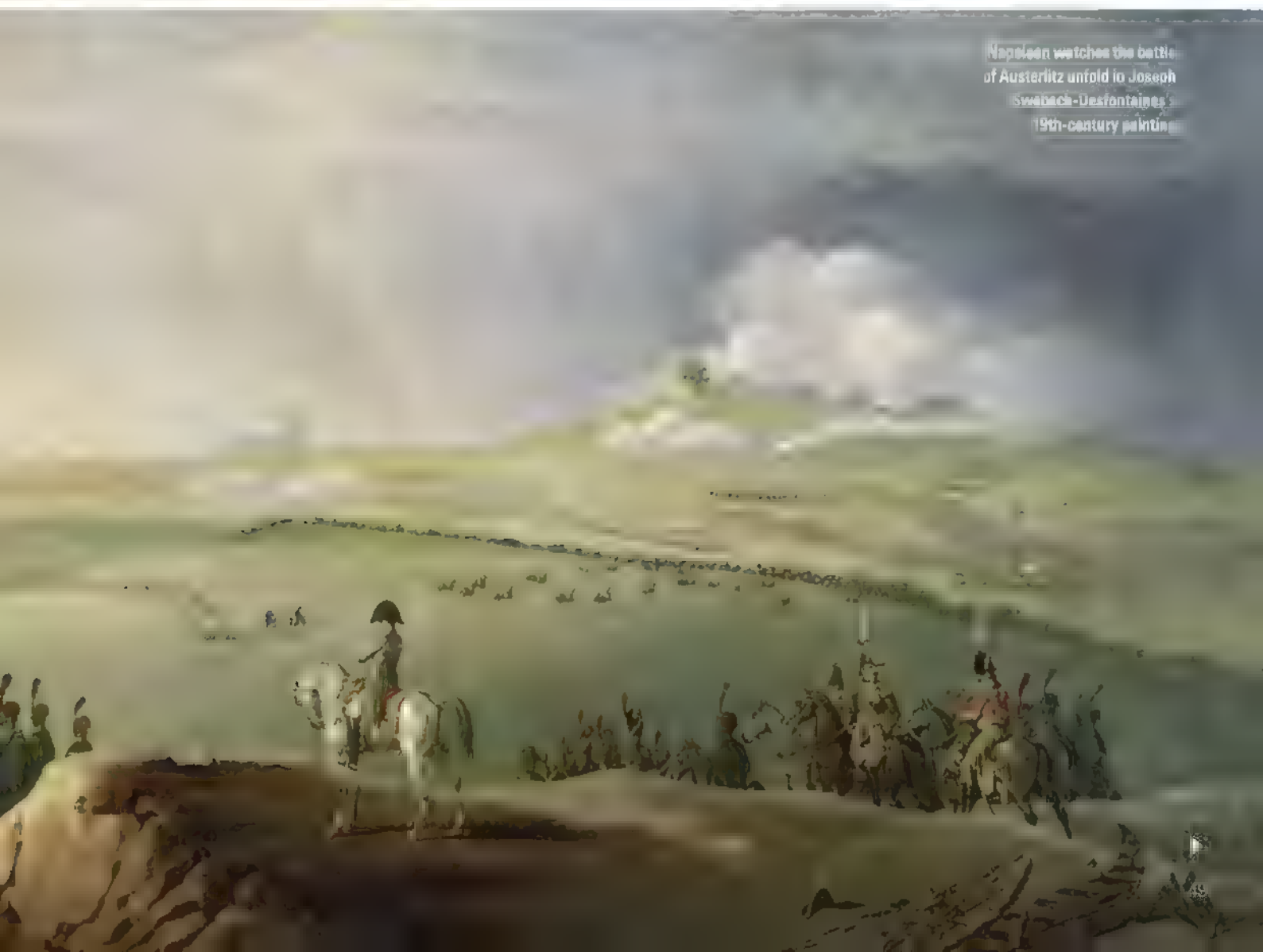
52,000. At Olmütz, about 45 miles north east of Brünn, Kutuzov halted his retreat, relieved to be joined by another Russian army commanded by General Buxhöwden. He was further bolstered by the arrival of a small Austrian army commanded by Prince Johann Liechtenstein. The allies now mustered about 78,000 men.

### **A matter of urgency**

The problem facing Napoleon was his urgent need to bring this Austro-Russian army to battle. His greatest fear was that the allies would withdraw to the east, forcing him to extend his already precarious line of communications even further as the biting cold of an eastern European winter took hold.

And it was a move such as this that Kutuzov, commander of this new combined army, advocated. Yet the final decision was no longer his to make. Tsar Alexander rode into Olmütz along with the reinforcements, determined to join his army at the front and lead it to victory. It was the Tsar who would decide the future direction of the army. A council of war took place in Olmütz on 24 November, during which Kutuzov outlined his plan for a retreat towards the Carpathian mountains, leaving a wasteland

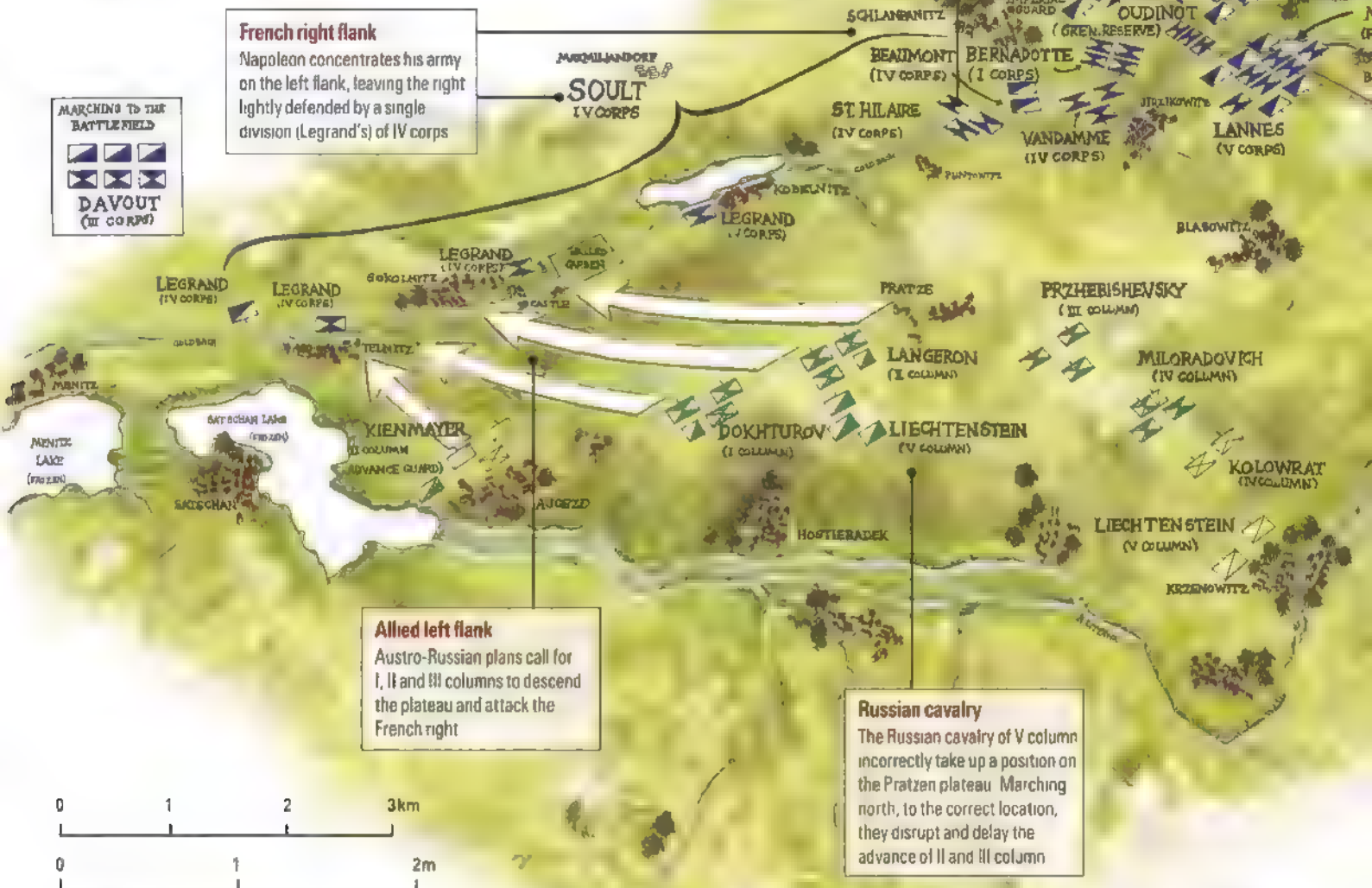
Napoleon watches the battle of Austerlitz unfold in Joseph Swetach-Desfontaines' 19th-century painting



# THE BATTLE OF AUSTERLITZ

The battle centred around the Pratzen plateau, west of the town of Austerlitz in what is now the Czech Republic. This illustration shows how the climactic clash unfolded on 2 December 1805

ILLUSTRATION BY ROGER HUTCHINS



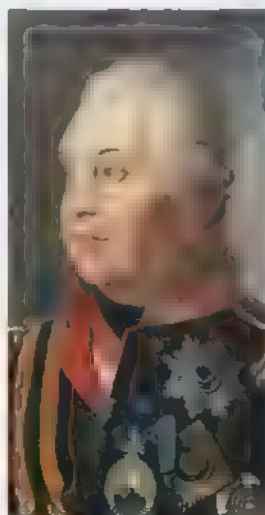
## KEY OPPONENTS AT AUSTERLITZ FACING NAPOLEON IN BATTLE

### Tsar Alexander I Emperor of Russia

Alexander succeeded his father, the unstable Paul I, to the throne in 1801 and took an enlightened view on political and social reform. However, he was vain and impressionable, surrounding himself with young, confident and arrogant aides. Convinced of the weakness of Napoleon's position – and against Kutuzov's advice – he ordered the army into battle at Austerlitz.

### General Mikhail Kutuzov Allied commander

Kutuzov enjoyed a distinguished military and diplomatic career in Russia. However, having fallen out of favour with Alexander in 1802, he remained virtually in exile until recalled to lead the army in 1805. He had grown portly, suffered from rheumatism and his twice-wounded right eye failed. However, he remained cunning, diplomatic and dogged, the best commander the army had.



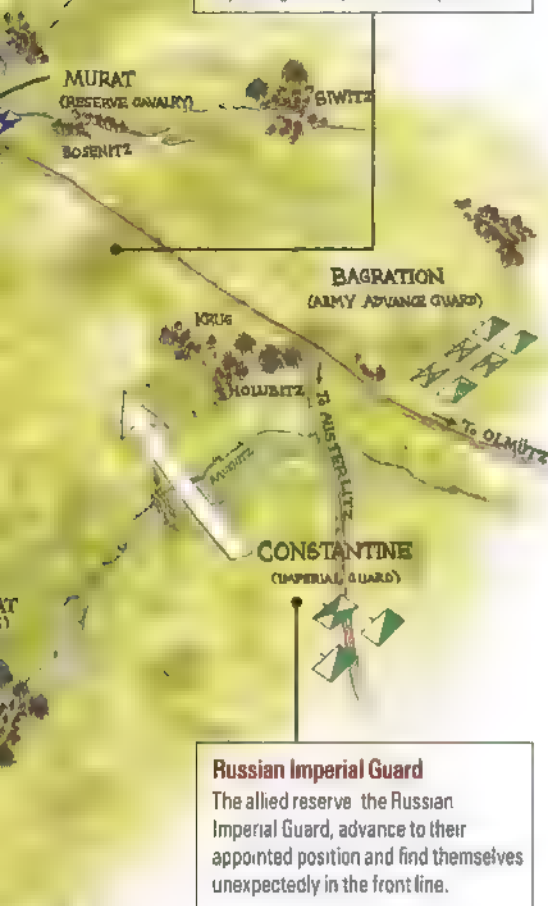
### Generalmajor Franz Freiherr von Weyrother Allied chief-of-staff

Weyrother had served in the Austrian army for 30 years, being appointed Kutuzov's chief-of-staff only within the previous fortnight. One officer considered him to be an officer "who did not want for talent" but one who "too easily abandoned his own opinions, to adopt those of other people". Another officer considered that he carried "his self-esteem to appalling excess".



### French left flank

Napoleon anticipated Lannes and Murat facing only limited opposition on the left flank. Instead they encountered Bagration and the Army Advance Guard, which prevented them from exploiting the capture of the plateau.



### Russian Imperial Guard

The allied reserve the Russian Imperial Guard, advance to their appointed position and find themselves unexpectedly in the front line.

French	Russian	Austrian
Infantry	Infantry	Infantry
Cavalry	Cavalry	Cavalry

All unit blocks represent brigades

in his wake to deter pursuit. By gaining time in this way he hoped to draw in General Bennigsen's distant army to further boost his strength. Other officers put forward ideas for a withdrawal into Hungary or Bohemia to join forces with approaching allied formations. However, all supported a common theme: that of retreat.

But the presence of the Tsar diluted the authority of these generals. Surrounded by his own circle of sycophantic advisors and would-be military experts, Tsar Alexander, without any military experience, willingly accepted their analysis that the French were over-extended and vulnerable. This, they advised him, was his best chance to cross

swords with the man recognised as the greatest soldier of his age, and win. Flattered and entranced by what he heard, Alexander overruled Kutuzov and took the decision to fight. Such was the standing of the Tsar in Russian society that no one felt inclined to oppose his wishes. It was just the decision Napoleon desired.

The task of drawing up the plan of campaign fell to Generalmajor Franz Weyrother, one of the few Austrian officers to command some respect at Russian headquarters. The advance was to commence the following day. And in fact if the army had moved quickly and brought Napoleon to battle before he could increase the strength of his army a different result may have ensued, but it would be another eight days before the two armies clashed at Austerlitz.

Many senior Russian officers felt sure that the arrival of the Tsar would "inspire great enthusiasm in his soldiers", but they were wrong. The army was tired and indisciplined. As Alexander rode among his soldiers they received him with "coldness and dull silence". A French émigré officer who was serving in the Russian army, Alexandre-Louis Langeron, saw this reaction and wrote that the Russian soldier "often judges men and events extremely well".

The allied advance should have begun on 25 November but plans immediately suffered a setback. An Austrian officer, Generalmajor Stutterheim, explaining the delay, wrote that "it was necessary to take two days' provisions; and these provisions could not arrive 'till the day after. When that day came, some of the generals had not sufficiently studied their dispositions; and thus, another day was lost". The army finally began to move on the morning of 27 November; confusion and dissension marched with it.

As the allied army completed its prolonged preparations, the situation at French headquarters was very different. On 21 November, the day after his arrival at Brünn, Napoleon rode out to study the ground east of the city. A tract of land running south of the Brünn-Olmütz road, lying to the west of the town of Austerlitz (now Slavkov), attracted his attention and he rode over every inch of it, calculating distances between high points, following streams and inspecting villages. At the end of his reconnaissance he turned to his staff and confidently predicted, "Gentlemen, examine the ground well. You will have a part to act on it". Napoleon had selected his battlefield, but it would be many days before the sound of battle engulfed it.

Still unsure if the allies would fight, Napoleon sent an emissary, General Savary

## Tsar Alexander overruled Kutuzov and took the decision to fight... no one felt inclined to oppose his wishes

– an expert in intelligence work – to meet the Tsar, intending to give an impression of uneasiness in the French camp and engender over-confidence among the allies. But his concerns were unfounded. By the time Savary arrived the decision to attack had already been made.

The Austro-Russian army began the advance along the Brünn-Olmütz road in five numbered columns, shielded by an advance guard. The exact position of the French was uncertain, but Weyrother believed that if an engagement took place along the road he would have the opportunity to outflank the French left. Initial march discipline was poor with wagons forcing their way into the formations and the army ending the first day extended along eight miles of the road. The following day the leading allied units surprised French outposts near the town of Wischau. A cavalry battle ensued from which the French fell back as numbers against them rapidly increased.

It was exactly the news Napoleon wanted to hear; the allies had abandoned their retreat. Immediately he instructed all advanced units to fall back to the selected battlefield and despatched orders summoning the outlying formations of the Marshals Bernadotte and Davout to make all haste, advising them that a great battle was about to take place on 29 or 30 November. In this he greatly over-estimated the cohesion and organisation of his opponents.

The lack of resistance met by the allied army as it advanced convinced Weyrother that the French were intent on falling back on Brünn before turning south towards Vienna. Therefore on 29 November he changed the alignment of the army, ordering it to deploy to the left of the Brünn-Olmütz road, putting it in a position to threaten the Vienna road. This change became hugely complex as not only did Weyrother reposition the columns but he also ordered their renumbering and transferred column commanders and individual regiments between formations. The realignment took two days to complete by which time the

## The battle for Europe Austerlitz

The cavalry of the Russian Imperial Guard captures the eagle standard carried into battle by a French regiment



With the allies in retreat, captured officers and standards are presented to Napoleon as he tours the field



BRIDGEMAN/GETTY IMAGES



army only managed to push on for about ten miles. It was now clear to Napoleon that his prediction of the battle taking place by 30 November was over-optimistic and so he took the opportunity to observe the leaden approach of the Austro-Russian army from the vantage point of the Pratzen plateau. It seemed evident to him, by the direction of the allied advance, that they planned to mass against his right flank, aiming to force him from the line of retreat back to Vienna

### **A climactic confrontation**

Now battle appeared imminent, Napoleon thought it essential that the confrontation proved a climactic one, one from which the allies could not withdraw and re-group to prolong the campaign.

As such he announced his intention of withdrawing all troops from the Pratzen plateau, the dominant feature of the battlefield and leaving it to the allies. Then, with the allies appearing intent on massing against his right, he would present a weakened flank hoping to tempt them to abandon the plateau in turn. At that point he planned to launch a rapid counter-thrust at the plateau from his main army concentration on the left of the line. By appearing in the rear of his opponents he hoped to cut off their retreat and decisively crush them.

Later that evening, 30 November, Napoleon received the welcome news that Bernadotte and Davout were fast approaching the battlefield, boosting his army to about 74,000 men, an increase of 40 per cent since the allies commenced their advance.

While Napoleon carefully planned the coming battle, the situation at allied headquarters was chaotic. Although nominally commander of the Austro-Russian army, Kutuzov found himself increasingly sidelined by Alexander, who, bearing a long-standing mistrust of his army commander, turned to Weyrother for military direction. The Tsar's youthful entourage took to ridiculing the aged general behind his back, an indiscretion also directed against senior Austrian officers, further damaging the unity of command.

On 1 December Weyrother issued orders for a further change in the composition of the allied columns. This delayed any forward movement until the early afternoon, leaving little time to move into position before darkness descended at about 4pm. A colonel of a Russian artillery battery, Alexei Ermolov, sums up the disorganisation of the allied ranks:

"The columns were colliding and penetrating each other, from which resulted disorder... The armies broke up and inter-mixed and it was not easy for them to find

## **There can be no doubt that the allies' decision to face Napoleon at Austerlitz was a grave mistake**

their allocated positions in the dark. Columns of infantry, consisting of a large number of regiments, did not have a single person from the cavalry, so there was nothing to help them find out what was going on ahead, or to know where the nearest columns, appointed for assistance, were and what they were doing."

Having ascended the steep eastern slopes of the Pratzen plateau, the exhausted allied soldiers settled down to grab what rest they could on a freezing cold night. Opposing them lay a French army of which at least two-thirds were well-rested, having spent the last 11 days on or around the battlefield waiting for the appearance of the allied army.

At about 1am on the morning of 2 December the senior officers of the Austro-Russian army congregated for their final briefing. Weyrother explained his plan of battle to them – in German – then waited patiently while a Russian staff officer, Major Toll, translated each section into Russian, the language spoken by 80 per cent of the combined army. Again dissension at headquarters is clear, for Langeron, one of those present, recalled that Weyrother "read us the arrangements in a raised voice and with a conceited air which was designed to show us his deep-seated belief in his own merit and in our inability".

Due to the disruption caused by Weyrother's latest changes, the majority of the assembled officers had been unable to observe the battlefield in daylight. Now their orders required them to commence their advance later that morning, at 7am, an hour before sunrise. The battlefield would be unknown territory. The meeting drew to a close at about 3am and only at this point could Toll begin to make a written copy of Weyrother's orders in Russian. Not until he finished could the assembled adjutants make copies to distribute to their commands. As a result some officers did not receive orders until after the battle had begun.

One officer, Colonel Ermolov, remained baffled. The orders, he explained, ran for several pages and were "filled with difficult names of villages, lakes, rivers, valleys, and

elevations and it was so complicated either to understand or remember them... I have to admit that after I listened to this disposition I had as little comprehension of it as if I was not aware of its existence; the only thing I understood was that we were supposed to attack the enemy in the morning".

### **Anger and frustration**

And so in the early hours of a cold and foggy 2 December 1805, the soldiers of the Austro-Russian army shook themselves awake, massaged life into their frozen limbs, and prepared to descend from the Pratzen plateau. The main thrust of the army focused on the French right flank, as Weyrother had planned and Napoleon surmised.

However, confusion and delay did not end there. Units that had lost their way in the dark or camped out of position overnight blundered into those preparing to march, causing anger and frustration. Even when the attacks did get underway, less than dynamic local leadership meant the allies did not press their early advantage against the French right before Napoleon launched his assault on the high ground in their rear. There, on the plateau, French troops encountered unexpected resistance but eventually won control, and after eight hours' fighting they inflicted a crushing defeat on the Austro-Russian army, bringing the campaign to a sudden and dramatic conclusion.

There can be no doubt that the allies' decision to face Napoleon at Austerlitz was a mistake. Without Alexander's intervention Kutuzov would have continued to retreat, and by the middle of December it is possible that 170,000 allied soldiers could have congregated in Hungary.

But this decision, combined with a disjointed command structure and a painfully slow advance – one that allowed Napoleon time to unravel their strategy and increase the strength of his army – sealed the fate of the Austro-Russian army even before the first musket shot rang out. Contrary to the myths that have grown up around the battle, Napoleon did not impose his will upon the allies. They were already intent on a course of action which he observed and effectively countered.

As the French army celebrated their great success, Napoleon, ever a man with a sense of drama, could reflect with great pleasure that his victory had fallen on a special day – for it marked the first anniversary of his coronation as Emperor of the French. **14**

Ian Castle has made an extensive study of the Austrian army's campaigns against Napoleon. His books include *Austerlitz: Napoleon and the Eagles of Europe* (Pen & Sword, 2018)



# Napoleon's 'Spanish ulcer'

For Napoleon, stalemate in the Peninsular War of 1808-14 tied up resources he desperately needed in other fronts across Europe. No wonder the conflict was compared to a festering sore that just would not heal, says **Jeremy Black**





British, Spanish and Portuguese allies engaged the French throughout the Iberian peninsula, including here at the battle of Albuera in 1811.



**I**n the battle of Albuera, in 1811, a staggering 40 per cent of the British troops were casualties. Captain John Hill, a Royal Navy officer who served in the Napoleonic Wars, was unequivocal in his assessment. "The carnage was without exception far more terrible than any I ever before have seen," he wrote.

The encounter was one of the bloodiest battles in the Peninsular War, the conflict between Napoleon's France and Spain – assisted by Britain and its ally Portugal – for control of the Iberian peninsula, which raged from 1808 to 1814. Marked by savagery and notable for an effective guerrilla campaign against Napoleon's Grand Armée by the Spanish civilian population, it led to the deaths of thousands without producing a decisive victory. Fighting it would place a considerable, and ultimately fatal, burden on Napoleon's resources.

The road to war had begun in 1806–07, when Napoleon imposed his Continental System on Europe. Under this blockade – designed to paralyse Great Britain through the destruction of its commercial links – neutrals and French allies were ordered not to trade with the British. Portugal, which in 1793 had signed a treaty of mutual assistance with Britain, refused to join the embargo. In retaliation, Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1807, to occupy and close down its ports. Once the nation had been conquered, however, there was no attempt to conciliate the Portuguese, and much of the public remained hostile to the occupiers – especially after the imposition of heavy taxes.

By 1808, France had achieved domination over the majority of continental Europe and had effectively eliminated Austria, Prussia and Russia as military opponents. But, increasingly imperious and unwilling to listen to advice, Napoleon was creating dangerous new enemies. The next to develop a grievance were the Spaniards. When the Spanish king Charles IV was forced to abdicate, due to the unpopular presence of French troops in his country, Napoleon exploited rifts within the Spanish royal family to pass the crown to his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, who became Joseph I of Spain in June 1808.

The response was outright rebellion, and what is now known as the War of Independence began. At the same time, a nationalist reaction also occurred in Portugal. These rebellions drew on a range of motivations, but there was a common rejection of French influence and interference. This shared hatred of

### **Napoleon created a new enemy... exploiting rifts within the Spanish royal family to replace it with his brother**

the French lessened political and social tensions between factions, and made it easier for rebel forces to recruit support.

The insurgents were neither wholly patriots fighting for crown, church and country, nor opportunists questing for booty – though both elements played a part. There was also opposition to French greed and the scale of its reformist policies – notably its virulent and often violent anticlericalism.

Then, from nowhere, in July 1808, Napoleon suffered a shock. At Bailén in southern Spain, the French were defeated in a series of battles from 16–19 July, as forces of the Spanish Army of Andalusia converged on an exposed and badly commanded corps of the Imperial French Army, led by General Pierre Dupont de l'Étang. Nearly 18,000 French troops gave themselves up to Spanish forces in a humiliating surrender. This was the first total defeat of a Napoleonic army in the field – vitally, it showed the rest of Europe that his forces were not invincible. After the loss, French forces retreated to the river Ebro in north-east Spain, giving up much of the country to the insurgents.



The placing of Napoleon's brother Joseph on the Spanish throne in 1808 sparked a popular revolt against French rule, and the beginning of the Peninsular War

The British, meanwhile, were watching the situation closely. They exploited Napoleon's setback with an expedition led by Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley – a brilliant rising military commander who would later become the Duke of Wellington – which landed at Mondego Bay in Portugal in early August. On 21 August 1808, this army defeated attacking French forces under General Jean-Andoche Junot at Vimeiro – a loss that effectively spelled the end of the French occupation of Portugal. During the battle, Wellesley cleverly sheltered his lines of infantry from the French cannon by deploying them behind a ridge, placing his riflemen in forward positions down the slope, using them to prevent the French skirmishers – light infantry deployed as a vanguard – from disrupting the British lines. The poorly coordinated French advancing columns were halted by British infantry and cannon fire, and driven back decisively by downhill charges.

#### **Napoleon enters the fray**

Following the victory, Wellesley was superseded by more senior officers, who did not wish to pursue the French further into Portugal and consolidate the advantage. At the Convention of Cintra on 30 August, they agreed with the French that the latter would evacuate Portugal, but would be returned to France in British ships, where they would then be free to resume hostilities. The British also agreed to ship the French baggage and booty. This agreement led to a public storm in Britain, and the officers were recalled to face an inquiry in London. In their place, Sir John Moore became commander.

Napoleon himself, meanwhile, responded to the crisis in Spain by intervening in person, arriving in Madrid on 4 December 1808. It looked as though the tide would turn once more in France's favour. Later that month, the siege of the French garrison in Barcelona – which had been in place since August – was lifted after a French victory at the battle of Cardedeu in Catalonia. The Supreme Central and Governing Junta – the head of the government rejecting French rule – retreated, first to Seville and then to Cádiz, where it could be supported by British warships.

Instructed to provide support for Napoleon's Spanish opponents, Lieutenant-General Moore advanced into Spain from Lisbon, only for large advancing French forces to force him into a retreat to the Galician port of A Coruña (known to the British as 'Corunna'), from where his troops could then be shipped home. The British fought a desperate rearguard battle as they retreated across northern Spain in bitter wintry condi-



Spanish soldiers defend Montealeón barracks during their uprising against Madrid's French occupiers in May 1808



tions, arriving at Corunna to find, to their dismay, that the transports had not arrived. They were forced to turn and hold off the French for a few more days. Though the evacuation was finally completed, Moore lost his life in the process – his death, burial and hasty embarkation by night captured in Charles Wolfe's 1817 poem *The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna*: "We buried him darkly at dead of night, / The sods with our bayonets turning..."

The French plan for an advance on Lisbon had been thrown into disarray, but having driven the British to Corunna, Marshal Nicolas Soult – Napoleon's military governor of Andalusia – moved south to take on the British forces in Portugal. These forces were garrisoning Lisbon under Lieutenant-General Sir John Francis Cradock. A cautious commander – perhaps understandably so in the aftermath of Moore's failure – Cradock felt that evacuation might be a necessity.

On 28 March 1809, Soult stormed and took the key Portuguese coastal city of Oporto (more commonly known today as Porto) – but he didn't have long to enjoy his success. Fresh British troops were being sent to Portugal under Wellesley, the hero of Vimero, who now assumed command of all British forces in the country. On 12 May, Wellesley made a surprise crossing of the river Douro, fought off counterattacks, and successfully retook Oporto from Soult in

a second battle. The triumph is commemorated today in the city's Monument to the Heroes of the Peninsular War, a striking statue showing a lion (a symbol of the Portuguese and British military alliance) crushing an eagle (representing the French imperial forces).

This well-executed offensive was aided by a slow response from the usually vigorous Soult, who had incorrectly assumed he had seized all boats that could be used for a crossing. Fleeing the defeat, Soult's force retreated northeast, plundering and causing devastation in the process. They torched much of the town of Amarante, where the locals defended their bridge as the French corps tried to search for a river crossing. The ruins of an old burnt-out manor house can still be seen by visitors to Amarante today – a relic of the brutal destruction that was commonplace under Napoleon's campaigns.

In the winter of 1809–10, Napoleon's victory in his war with Austria – known as the War of the Fifth Coalition – led to the dispatch of reinforcements to Iberia, although France initially concentrated on its Spanish opponents.

Given reluctant command of the Army of Portugal, the brilliant Marshal André Masséna was ordered to conquer that country. The threat of French attack led Wellesley – now Viscount Wellington – to

fall back in 1810, avoiding battle with the far larger French army.

Wellington's strategy was one of defence in depth, and he was given added time when Napoleon ordered Masséna – against the wishes of the latter, who wanted to march directly on Lisbon – first to capture the strong border fortresses of Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain and Almeida in Portugal. Although both fortresses fell (the second after the powder magazine was blown up on 27 August), it delayed the marshal's plans. To make matters worse, Napoleon also provided Masséna – who had risen from humble origins, without formal education, to become one of the most illustrious commanders in the French army – with far fewer troops than he had promised.

Rather than withdrawing to Britain by sea, Wellington was convinced that Portugal could be held, and developed a strong fallback fortified position to cover nearby Lisbon. He also preserved a line protecting the mighty fortress of São Julião da Barra, on the shore of the Tagus west of Lisbon, in case the British needed to shelter a rushed evacuation.

Portugal was invaded by Masséna's army on 15 September 1810. Wellington chose to resist the advancing forces in a good forward defensive position in the Serra do Buçaco mountain range in late September. The French found the British and Portuguese

## FIVE KEY PENINSULAR WAR BATTLES

How the momentum swung in Britain's favour thanks to Wellington's genius and the bravery of his troops

The Anglo-Spanish army combined against French forces at Talavera, to the southwest of Madrid in 1809



### 1 27-28 JULY 1809 Talavera

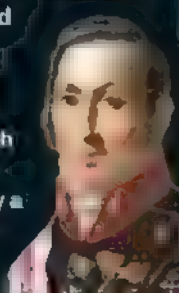
Victorious in Portugal, Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, crossed into Spain to attack Marshal Victor's army. On 22 July, Wellesley joined with Spanish forces at Talavera, but the French were rapidly assembling a powerful response. Wellesley's boldness had left him exposed. On 27 and 28 July, the French attacked the Anglo-Spanish army at Talavera, concentrating their attack on the outnumbered British. Wellesley deployed his infantry firepower to

repulse the French columns, but the pursuit of the retreating French threw the British into confusion, and fresh French units drove them back. The final French attack on the centre of the Allied line was only just held, with Wellesley committing his reserve. But held it was, although the British suffered 5,400 casualties more than a quarter of the force. Wellesley subsequently had to retreat in the face of fresh, larger French forces.

### 2 19 NOVEMBER 1809 Ocaña

A Spanish army advancing on Madrid under Aréizaga (pictured right), with at least 51,000 troops, was opposed by a 30,000-strong army under the nominal command of King Joseph, but in reality led by Marshal Nicolas Soult. The French won the cavalry action on 18 November 1809, and on 19 November benefited from superior artillery and a cavalry attack on the exposed Spanish right flank. With

French infantry attacking their front, the Spaniards collapsed, with 18,000 casualties, including 4,000 killed and wounded, compared with 2,000 French killed and wounded. The French were able to invade Andalusia, helped by a victory soon after at Alba de Tormes.



### 3 22 JULY 1812 Salamanca

Wellington's invasion of northern Spain represented a major move onto the offensive. Deployed in a defensive position near Salamanca, and noting that the French under Marmont were overextended, Wellington rapidly and effectively switched from defence to attack and ably combined his infantry and cavalry in the destruction of French units in a series of almost separate clashes. The French had 14,000 casualties, including 7,000 prisoners; the Allies had 5,200, a third of whom were Portuguese.

### 4 21 JUNE 1813 Vitoria

Wellington's skill at wide-ranging flanking movements, combined with inadequate French generalship and poor field dispositions led to a crushing French defeat. Wellington took the strategic and tactical offensive, and his ability to plan a battle was particularly necessary on a battlefield that extended for eight miles. The outnumbered French suffered 8,000 casualties, the Anglo-Portuguese-Spanish victors 5,000, including 3,300 British. The French lost about 400 cannon and their baggage train. Their morale shattered, the French retreated towards the Pyrenees, opening the way for British forces to invade France.



A victorious Wellington after the battle of Toulouse

### 5 10 APRIL 1814 Toulouse

The last battle of the campaign occurred at the close of Wellington's invasion of France, which had taken him across from the Atlantic coast. Wellington pursued Soult, defeating him at Orthez on 27 February 1814. At Toulouse, his Anglo-Portuguese-Spanish army outnumbered Soult 50,000 to 42,000. However, the strong French defensive position and exposure of the attacking forces to heavy fire meant the Allied forces suffered significant losses, despite claiming victory. News of Napoleon's abdication came from Paris soon after the battle.



drawn up on a ridge, and their poorly planned attacks were repulsed with nearly 5,000 casualties.

However, Wellington's position was then out-flanked, and the British and Portuguese troops fell back to the Lines of Torres Vedras, his fortifications near Lisbon – the grass-covered remnants of which can still be seen today. The French reached the Lines by 12 October and made a further attack on the 14th, but they were too strong to breach, and the devastation in the surrounding countryside, thanks to scorched-earth policies, meant that the French forces came to suffer serious malnutrition. Captain John Hill recorded: "The country is dreadfully ravaged. I saw nothing except a few pigeons left about the villages; the floors and rafters taken out either to burn or make huts... what a few months before had been a fine country is literally now a desert."

The winter did its damage, not least by greatly exacerbating French supply difficulties and, on 5 March 1811, after very heavy losses to disease and hunger, Masséna began to retreat. What had in effect been a large-scale siege of Lisbon by land had failed.

#### Wellington goes for the jugular

In his retreat, Masséna was chased by Wellington, who launched harassing attacks as he followed. To the north, the city of Almeida was besieged by the British, and Masséna's attempts to relieve it were blocked at Fuentes de Oñoro in early May. When Almeida fell, Marshal Masséna was dismissed by a typically unforgiving Napoleon.

Meanwhile, Spanish armies and irregulars – poorly armed, supplied and trained – were repeatedly defeated by the French, who conquered Andalusia (except for Cádiz) in 1810, Extremadura in 1811, and Catalonia and Valencia in 1811–12. Much damage was inflicted on the country's infrastructure in the process, while the great Benedictine monastery at Montserrat in Catalonia was sacked and burned down.

Nevertheless, casualties sustained by the French forces in Spain were considerable, exceeding those from most of Napoleon's campaigns. Indeed, at the battle of Albuera in May 1811 (which resulted in a narrow Allied victory), more than 7,000 French troops were killed or wounded in the matter of a few hours. The Spaniards were generally unsuccessful in formal conflict, and British generals could be critical of their organisation.

However, Spain's regular and guerrilla operations denied the French control over the countryside and, in particular, greatly harmed their communications and logistics operations. Thanks to strong resistance, the French were unable to concentrate their superior

Francisco Goya's 1814 painting *The Third of May 1808* shows Spanish civilian resisters to French occupation being rounded up and executed by Napoleon's troops



### Joseph's return to France signalled the end of a regime that had been brutal, costly and destructive

forces against Wellington. They would have been able to do so had they knocked out the Spanish, which would have been a possibility but for Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, which stretched his resources far too thinly.

The endgame had begun. Having successfully defended Portugal from attack, in 1812 Wellington's Anglo-Portuguese forces took the key Spanish border fortresses of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, each formidable positions. They moved on to invade northern Spain, defeating the French at Salamanca and occupying Madrid, as British amphibious forces raided the Biscay coast.

Although he had to retire in the face of the concentration of French forces in the autumn of 1812, Wellington went on the offensive again in 1813, this time decisively. Napoleon's brother Joseph fled Madrid to block any British advance on France, only to be defeated at Vitoria in the Basque Country, via a daring flanking manoeuvre from the British over terrain considered to be impassable. After his victory, Wellington pressed on to capture San Sebastián and Pamplona. Apart from a few isolated fortresses, French rule in Spain was at an end.

Joseph abdicated and returned to France, signalling the end of a regime that had been

brutal, costly and destructive. A series of artworks by the Spanish painter and print-maker Francisco Goya, known collectively as the *Disasters of War*, is among the most vivid reminders of the brutality of Napoleon's occupation and all that followed. In Barcelona, the French garrison maintained order in 1808 by shooting all suspects and confiscating the properties of the wealthy and the church. Money was drained out of the local economy by seizures and forced contributions, and the black market thrived. Córdoba was stormed and plundered that year, while the hard-fought 1808–09 French siege of Zaragoza (also known as Saragossa) led to the deaths of thousands of civilians. In Granada, the cherished Alhambra was damaged by the French in 1812. More generally, as a result of the war, Spain's economy, society, culture and politics were put under great pressure, and lawlessness and corruption escalated.

But it was for Napoleon that the Peninsular War turned out to be the most costly. Intended as a minor campaign, it became instead one of his most exhausting engagements. It undermined his reputation for invincibility in battle, and locked thousands of French troops into the Iberian peninsula, far from where they were needed in Germany, in his bitter and ultimately unsuccessful battles against the Sixth Coalition. The open wound of the Peninsular War, then, would play a major role in the Man of Destiny's eventual downfall. ■

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**Jeremy Black** is emeritus professor of history at the University of Exeter. His most recent books include *Combined Operations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) and *Fortifications and Siegecraft* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018)

# CHILDBIRTH AND CANNON FIRE

**Annabel Venning**, author of a history of army wives, tells the story of women who left Britain and shared with their menfolk the terrible hardships and dangers of the Peninsular War



The following pages  
of the third issue of  
the magazine will be  
devoted to the story of  
the women who went  
with the army to the  
Peninsula.



**I**n a memoir published in the 1840s, Sergeant Anthony Hamilton of the 43rd (Monmouthshire) Regiment of Foot described the terrible suffering of soldiers' wives and children during the infamous retreat to Corunna in the winter of 1808–09.

"The road was bestrewn by the bodies of men dead and dying. But the agonies of the women were still more dreadful to behold. Of these, by some strange neglect, or by some mistaken sentiment of humanity, an unusually large proportion had been suffered to accompany the army. Some of these unhappy creatures were taken in labor [sic] on the road, and amid the storms of sleet and snow, gave birth to infants, which, with their mothers, perished as soon as they had seen the light... Others, in the unconquerable energy of maternal love, would toil on with one or two children on their back; till on looking round, they perceived that the hapless objects of their attachment were frozen to death."

Sergeant Hamilton was a member of the British force, led by Sir John Moore, that had been sent to the Iberian peninsula to liberate it from Napoleon's invading armies. But, let down by his Spanish allies, Moore soon found himself in danger of being cornered by numerically superior French forces. To save his army he was forced to lead a rapid retreat to the port of Corunna on Spain's northern coast, where it could be evacuated.

The men, furious at having been made to retreat, were also marching hungry and, in many cases, barefoot, thanks to the failures of the supply system. Discipline soon began to break down and often the women joined their husbands in ransacking the Spanish villages they passed through. Whenever they unearthed a stash of wine they would fall upon it, pouring the liquid down their throats to slake their thirst and numb their misery. Men, women and children lay prostrate on the ground, wine oozing from their mouths and nostrils. They were easy prey for the French advance guard and many were killed, maimed or captured.

In October 1808, at the beginning of the campaign, Moore had tried to dissuade the women from accompanying the troops, asking his commanding officers to "use their endeavours to prevent as many as possible, particularly those having young children, or such as are not stout, or equal to fatigue, from following the army" and even offered to pay their passages back to England. But most women preferred to endure whatever hardships lay ahead rather than be parted from their husbands



Having women in camp helped to banish the horrors of war, as seen in a 1798 aquatint after Thomas Rowlandson

They had already overcome great odds to get this far, competing in the ballot to accompany the army. The usual ratio was six wives per company of hundred, or four to every 60 men, although this was sometimes exceeded. The ballot often took place the night before embarkation, or even on the day itself, when lots were drawn at the quayside. It was feared that if it were done any sooner those men whose wives had not succeeded in the ballot would desert before embarkation.

In exchange for half rations the women were expected to make themselves useful, cooking, washing and sewing. While their husbands were often glad to have them, there were those who believed the women's presence benefited neither the army nor themselves. Adam Wall, a gunner captain, thought it "a most mistaken idea to suppose that women can possibly be of the smallest use to an Army upon active service. The supposition of their washing for the soldiers is a delusion, for washing is a comfort the soldiers never sought, and the women never able or inclined to supply". On the 250-mile

**In exchange for half rations they were expected to make themselves useful, cooking, washing and sewing for the men**

retreat to Corunna, most were too exhausted to do anything other than collapse when a halt was called.

Others, like Hamilton, thought it a mistake to expose women and children to the terrible conditions of the march. Almost every account of the retreat records harrowing scenes of their suffering: a commissary saw the body of a soldier's wife lying in the snow with a baby, still alive, nuzzling in vain at her breast. A soldier saw a woman fall into a hole in the road and sink up to her waist. As she struggled to free herself from the mud the oncoming column of men, rather than stopping to help her, simply marched over her, treading on her and burying her alive in the quagmire. Another wife, unable to keep up, stopped for a night in a barn where she was found and raped by French soldiers. The resulting baby was born in England.

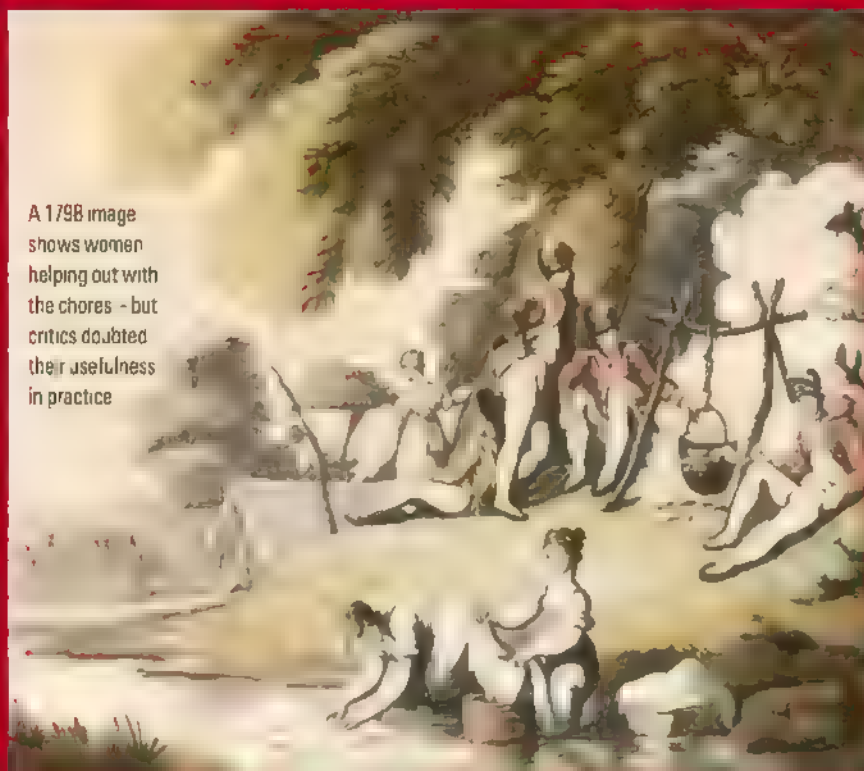
### **Unladylike behaviour**

Many of the women, and men, did not make it home. Moore himself was killed in the battle fought at Corunna before the British embarkation. Yet when the army returned to the peninsula, this time commanded by Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington), soldiers' wives, and some officers' ladies, once again accompanied their men. Wellington was often infuriated by their presence as they frequently proved averse to military discipline. When criticised for allowing so many women to be flogged, he pointed out they were "at least as bad, if not worse, than the men as Plunderers. And the exemption of the ladies from punishment would have encouraged Plunder".

Yet, for all these perils and problems, women often proved that their presence could be a boon, not only to their husbands but to their fellow soldiers too. The wife of the black cymbalman with the 88th (Connaught Rangers) Regiment (which like other regiments, had several black soldiers in its ranks at this period) a Mrs Howley, was taken prisoner in a skirmish in September 1811, in which several officers were wounded. Captain Grattan, also of the 88th, recorded that "the loss of Mrs Howley was a source of grief to the entire division. The officers so maimed might be replaced by others, but perhaps in the entire army such another woman, take her for all and all, as Mrs Howley could not be found". She must have endeared herself greatly to her husband's company to be so mourned.

Other women won admiration for their bravery, such as Mrs Reston, the wife of a soldier in the 94th (Scots Brigade) Regiment, who followed the campaign with her

A 1798 image shows women helping out with the chores - but critics doubted their usefulness in practice



## TEN RULES FOR THE ARMY WIFE

A compilation of regulations from the standing orders of different regiments

- 1** A woman's first duty is to make her husband's home happy and comfortable, and to bring up her children decently and respectably
- 2** None but the guard and the sick are to march with the baggage, no woman is to be allowed to do so
- 3** The women and children will parade every Saturday in the married barracks for the medical officer's inspection
- 4** If any women cause disturbance in barracks, by quarrelling or spreading malicious reports of each other or of their husbands, the offenders will be immediately removed from barracks
- 5** No woman is to be allowed in barracks who objects to making herself useful in cleaning the rooms, cooking etc.
- 6** The women must learn to fold the towels, shirts, etc, as directed for kit inspections, so that there may be uniformity throughout the battalion
- 7** Married women indulged with accommodation in barracks are to keep their rooms clean and their bedding properly folded; they must be neat in their persons and keep their children clean, and conduct themselves in an orderly manner
- 8** The wives of non-commissioned officers and soldiers must consider themselves just as amenable to discipline as their husbands; repeated infringements of orders will render a woman liable to be deprived of her privileges, and her name struck off the roll of the married establishment
- 9** Neither soldiers nor their wives and children will ever be allowed to leave barracks unless respectably dressed
- 10** Before any woman is placed on the married establishment satisfactory testimonials as to her character and respectability will be required



Women search the battlefield for their fallen husbands in this contemporary lithograph

four-year-old son. Her husband was part of a detachment that held the small, poorly-fortified outlying fort of Matagorda at Cádiz where, in 1810, a British contingent was besieged by French forces. For 30 hours the French concentrated their fire on Matagorda. Nearly half the garrison troops were killed

Throughout the bombardment Mrs Reston helped to nurse wounded men in a shelter. When a surgeon ordered a young drummer boy to fetch water, the boy hesitated as the well was the target of heavy enemy fire. Seeing his fear, Mrs Reston volunteered to go instead. She crossed the square under fire and when the bucket was shot out of her hand retrieved it and accomplished her task. Joseph Donaldson, one of her husband's comrades, observed how she also "carried sand bags for the repair of the battery, handed out ammunition and supplied the men at the guns with wine and water". She received no reward for her bravery and ended her days in the Glasgow poorhouse.

No less brave was Biddy Skiddy, an Irishwoman "as broad as a big turtle", whose husband Dan was a soldier in the 34th





(Cumberland) Regiment. She once carried him on her back for half a league in order to prevent him being captured or killed by the French when his rheumatism left him unable to walk. Fear, she later said, made her "as strong as Sampson" and she brought him safely into camp although her back, she complained, was "bruck entirely from that time to this, an' it'll never get strait till I go to the Holy Well in Ireland, and have Father McShane's blessin', an' his hand laid over me!"

Grateful as her husband must have been, others were less appreciative. Biddy and her fellow wives regularly held up the whole army by going ahead on their little donkeys and blocking the way in their efforts to be first in camp and ready with a hot cup of tea when the men arrived. Wellington issued an order that if they did not stay in the rear their donkeys would be executed. Biddy ignored it and her donkey was duly shot.

Many officers viewed soldiers' wives as hardened, unfeminine creatures. Life in the field, thought one officer, "sadly unsexes them". Their habit of remarrying within days, sometimes hours, of their husband's

## On the battlefield women were searching for their husbands, turning over each bloodied body

death led some observers to brand them callous. But widows had little choice but to pick themselves up and remarry, as there was no official widows' pension. Other women turned to the nefarious practice of body-stripping – removing valuables and clothing from dead and dying men on the battlefield. They could be seen picking through corpses alongside other women who were desperately searching for their husbands, turning over each bloodied body to examine its face. Some even went onto the field while battle was raging: Susanna Dalbiac, an officer's

wife, is said to have ridden beside her husband at the battle of Salamanca in 1812.

If the women in the peninsula became tough, it was because they were made so by the brutality of war and the harsh conditions. It was, thought Donaldson, "almost incredible what the poor women who followed us had to endure, marching often in a state of pregnancy, and frequently bearing their children in the open air, in some instances, on the line of march, by the road side; suffering, at the same time, all the privation to which the army was liable". It is difficult to disagree with those who, like Hamilton, believed women and children should not have been exposed to the harsh conditions of life on the march. But it is equally hard not to join Donaldson in admiring the hardy heroines of the peninsula who demonstrated that loyalty and courage were not the sole preserve of men. **H**

Annabel Venning's latest book is *To War With the Walkers* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019). She is also the author of *Following the Drum: The Lives of Army Wives and Daughters* (Headline, 2005)



Napoleon's troops retreating from Moscow in 1812, shown in an 1888-89 painting by Jan van Chelmonski. Tsar Alexander I's forces would harry them all the way back to the Russian border.





# How Napoleon was humbled

Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 ended in disaster. A vicious winter played a part but, says **Dominic Lieven**, there were other crucial factors involved in the defeat of the French army

**I**n 1812 Napoleon invaded Russia with the largest army yet seen in Europe. Of the 600,000 soldiers he led into Russia in 1812 a mere 25,000 survived to fight for him in the campaign of 1813.

The scale of the catastrophe astonished Europe and led to the formation of an alliance between Russia, Austria, Prussia and Britain. This alliance defeated Napoleon on the German battlefields in 1813 and then invaded France the following year. The allied armies captured Paris in March 1814 and overthrew Napoleon.

In 1812 Russia was the only remaining independent great power on the continent. By a series of stunning victories from 1805–09 Napoleon had wrecked Austria and Prussia and forced both countries to become his satellites.

Napoleon's key aim in attacking Russia was to turn it into a satellite too. A defeated Russia would cease to be a threat to Napoleon's European empire and would become an obedient tool in his war against Britain. Perhaps it would be forced to mount a threat to British interests in India and Persia. Certainly it would have to ruin its trade and finances by joining Napoleon's economic war against Britain. Russia would also have to cede some of its western borderland provinces to the reborn Polish kingdom, which was Napoleon's most loyal satellite in eastern Europe.

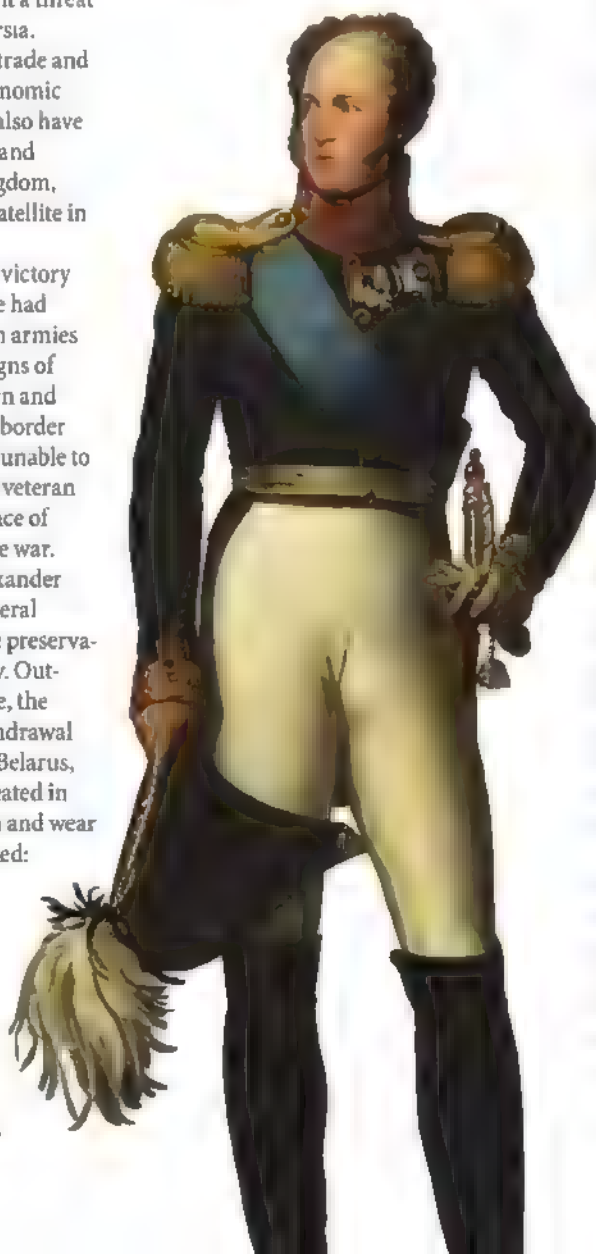
Napoleon aimed to win a quick victory over Russia in the same way that he had defeated the Austrian and Prussian armies in a matter of weeks in the campaigns of 1805 and 1806. If he could pin down and destroy the Russian army near the border then the tsar, Alexander, would be unable to continue the struggle. Without his veteran cadres the tsar would have no chance of rebuilding a viable army during the war.

Realising Napoleon's aims, Alexander and his chief military advisor, General Mikhail Barclay de Tolly, made the preservation of their army their top priority. Out-numbered by more than two to one, the Russians adopted a strategy of withdrawal across the whole of Lithuania and Belarus, scorching the country as they retreated in order to deny supplies to Napoleon and wear down his forces. The strategy worked: by the time Napoleon reached Smolensk on the borders of the Russian heartland, he outnumbered the Russians by less than three to two.

During the battles near Smolensk in August 1812 Napoleon was presented with the opportunity he craved to crush

### **A defeated Russia would cease to be a threat to Napoleon's empire and would become an obedient tool in his war against Britain**

A portrait of Russian tsar Alexander I in 1814. He deserves more credit for Napoleon's defeat than is often recognised



the Russian forces. That he missed his chance is due, primarily, to blunders made by his subordinates – though the Russian troops' fierce and skilful resistance also played its part.

Napoleon then had the option of ending his campaign in Smolensk and using the winter of 1812–13 to consolidate his base in Lithuania and Belarus in preparation for a strike into the Russian heartland in the spring of 1813. But he feared that France would be wracked by political instability if he was away for two campaigns. He also (correctly) doubted his ability to feed his army in winter in Lithuania and Belarus. So he chose to march on Moscow in September 1812.

The Russian capital was only two weeks' march from Smolensk. In the post-harvest season Napoleon could easily feed his army in the Russian heartland. He also knew that the Russian army could not abandon Moscow without offering battle, so providing him with the opportunity to destroy it. Napoleon got his battle at Borodino in September but failed to achieve a decisive victory. The French took Moscow but that elusive strategic objective – the destruction of the Russian army – had escaped him yet again.

As a result, Napoleon had no idea what to do next and sat in Moscow hoping that Alexander would himself decide to make peace or be forced to do so by Russia's elites. This showed how little Napoleon understood his enemy: knowing full well that Moscow could become a trap for the French with winter approaching, peace was the last thing on Alexander's mind. In fact, even if he had wished to come to terms, Alexander would not have been able to do so since Russian public opinion, already outraged by the French invasion, was further infuriated by the burning of Moscow.

#### **Beating a retreat**

After dawdling in Moscow for six weeks while Alexander mobilised resistance, Napoleon was forced, by the prospect of being cut off and unable to feed his army, to retreat all the way back to the Russian frontier. In the process, he looked on with ever growing alarm as his army disintegrated before him.

The ferocious Russian winter has long taken credit for humbling Napoleon's forces but French indiscipline proved even more telling. So too did the enormously superior Russian light cavalry (above all, Cossack irregulars), who harassed Napoleon's troops and denied them any possibility to forage away from the roads.

Yet Alexander knew that driving Napoleon out of Russia was not enough. So long as





This 1850 lithograph shows Napoleon's troops going on the rampage in Moscow, 1812.

## The battle for Europe Napoleon in Russia

Alexander Ivanovich Sauerweid's painting of the battle of Leipzig in October 1813, in which coalition forces inflicted a decisive defeat on Napoleon's army. Below: Russian cavalry officers, like this one from c1812, played a key role in Napoleon's defeat



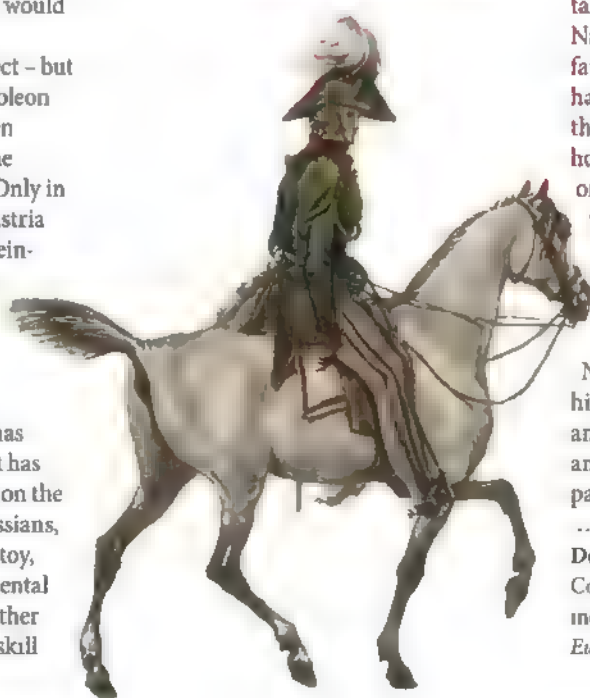
Napoleon dominated Germany and all of western and southern Europe, he would remain an enormous threat to Russian security.

Directly or indirectly Napoleon ruled over 63 million subjects in 1812; the tsar just 42 million. Russia could not afford the cost of securing its frontiers against such an enemy for long. So, in December 1812, Alexander invaded central Europe. In doing so, he hoped that Prussia and Austria would join his war against Napoleon.

The tsar's calculation proved correct – but only just. In the first half of 1813 Napoleon put a new army of almost 500,000 men in the field, initially outnumbering the Russo-Prussian allies by two to one. Only in the autumn 1813 campaign, when Austria finally joined the allies and Russian reinforcements arrived en masse, did the advantage swing towards the allies. Even then victory rested on a knife edge until the decisive battle of Leipzig in October 1813.

Russia's role in Napoleon's defeat has been widely misunderstood. The west has tended to blame his invasion's failure on the climate and Napoleon's mistakes. Russians, meanwhile, thanks partly to Leo Tolstoy, have placed the emphasis on the elemental force of Russian mass patriotism. Neither side has given due recognition to the skill

### Crucially, Russia mobilised its formidable horse industry for war with exceptional skill



with which the Russian government executed a strategy that played to Russia's strengths and Napoleon's weaknesses in 1812.

One key reason why both sides have so seriously underestimated Russia's victory is that the 1812 campaign is not studied in the context of Alexander's overall grand strategy, which only came to fruition in 1813–14.

Alexander inspired and led the continental coalition that ultimately destroyed Napoleon's empire. The Russian army was far more formidable in autumn 1813 than it had been in 1812, and it formed the core of the allied coalition's military forces. The horse was in many ways the key to Napoleonic-era warfare, playing the role of the tank, aeroplane, lorry and mobile artillery in today's warfare. Crucially, Russia mobilised its formidable horse industry for war with exceptional skill.

Above all, however, Russia defeated Napoleon because its leaders out-thought him. Tsar Alexander's combined military and diplomatic strategy was more realistic and more subtle than was Napoleon Bonaparte's reliance on blitzkrieg. ■

Dominic Lieven is an honorary fellow of Trinity College, University of Cambridge. His books include *Russia Against Napoleon: The Struggle for Europe, 1807–1814* (Penguin, 2009)



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Charles Calvert's painting shows a 'sham fight' on the Serpentine in Hyde Park, celebrating Napoleon's fall from power in 1814. The French emperor's defeat sparked a nationwide outpouring of relief, yet he would soon be back to spoil the party.



# The Napoleon Complex

As Britain's military fortunes ebbed and flowed in the run-up to the battle of Waterloo, the public mood routinely swung from joy to horror and back again. **Jenny Uglow** tells the story of the year when fear of Napoleon stalked the land.



**I**n August 1814, Britain was rejoicing at the end, so a relieved population thought, of the long conflict with France and the toppling of Napoleon Bonaparte. The prince regent announced a grand jubilee in London's royal parks, to be held on 1 August – a date that also marked a centenary of Hanoverian rule.

It was rather more spectacular than he hoped. The Chinese pagoda in St James's Park caught fire and tumbled into the lake, killing two men and some swans, and drawing huge crowds who thought it was all part of the show. In Hyde Park, the fair-ground shows of Bartholomew Fair, due at the end of the month, took over the ground: the attractions included swings, roundabouts, wild-beast shows, donkey racing and sack-racing, and even printing presses to run off souvenirs. The writer Charles Lamb groaned that the grass was turned to sand, and "booths & drinking places go all round it for a mile & half... the stench of liquors, bad tobacco, dirty people & provisions, conquers the air".

At the outset of the wars with France in 1793, politicians had assured the public that the conflict would be finished in months. Yet by now, broken only by the brief Peace of Amiens in 1802, the fighting had continued for over 20 years: 300,000 men had died and many more were wounded and maimed.

Briefly, the country was wild with relief. But the following spring, elation would turn to despair at Napoleon's return, then to anxiety and finally to mingled joy and horror at the news of the battle of Waterloo. Dizzying changes of mood swept the people of Britain as they cheered, waited, watched and trembled.

### Rise and thaw

It was always hard to keep up with news from the battlefronts, and in the biting winter of 1813–14 snow drifts had blocked the roads, the rivers were frozen and the mails were stopped.

But with the thaw came a rise in hopes. In the north Napoleon's army was fighting a brilliant rear-guard action to stop the combined armies of Austria, Prussia and Russia marching across his borders, but in the south, the Duke of Wellington had defeated French forces in Spain and had crossed the Pyrenees. In this time of suspense, ordinary life went on. "Do not be angry with me for beginning another letter to you," Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in March, "I have read *The Corsair*, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do."

## Elation would turn to despair at Napoleon's return, then to anxiety and finally to mingled joy and horror at the news of the battle of Waterloo

Then came a wave of alarm: hearing rumours of French victories, people rushed to sell stocks before prices fell. On 4 April 1814, *The Times* was still carrying accounts of French triumphs from the Paris papers. Yet in fact, in the last two days of March – a week before the news reached the London press – the Russians and Prussians had entered Paris. On 2 April, the new French Senate declared that Napoleon Bonaparte was officially deposed.

"The week before Easter was certainly a very agitating one," wrote the elderly aristocrat Amabel Hume-Campbell, "& to be sure I slept but little the night after that Tuesday when three different gradations of incredible good news came on us from hour to hour."

The papers were peppered with contradictory reports but finally, on the evening of Saturday 9 April, the day before Easter, a *Gazette Extraordinary* from the Foreign Office appeared, saying that despatches had

arrived "announcing the abdication of the crowns of France and Italy by Napoleon Bonaparte".

Queues formed outside booksellers and the stock of newspapers ran out. The country rang with bells and shone with illuminations. "What overpowering events!" exclaimed the clergyman John Stonard. "Surely there will never be any more news as long as we live. The papers will be as dull as a ledger and politics insipid as the white of an egg."

On Easter Monday the allies signed the Treaty of Fontainebleau, exiling Napoleon to Elba and restoring Louis XVIII. "Nap the Mighty is gone to pot," wrote the teenage Thomas Carlyle in amazement. The novelist Maria Edgeworth exclaimed: "All that has passed in France in the last few weeks, a revolution without bloodshed! Paris taken without being pillaged."

At Hartwell, in Buckinghamshire, the new French king Louis XVIII, a portly widower, and his niece the Duchesse d'Angoulême, the only surviving child of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, packed their bags for their return. Later that month Louis paid a state visit to London. "At this present writing, Louis the Gouty is wheeling in triumph into Piccadilly, in all the pomp and rabblement of royalty," wrote Lord Byron to Tom Moore. "I had an offer of seats to see them pass; but as I have seen a sultan going to mosque, and been at his reception of an ambassador, the most Christian king 'hath no attractions for me'." On 24 April Louis left Dover for Calais on the yacht *Royal Sovereign*, entering Paris on 3 May.

### Hobbling soldiers

Slowly the soldiers returned home. The rifleman Benjamin Harris, suffering from fever contracted during the ill-fated Walcheren expedition to the Netherlands in 1809, marched to Chelsea with his veterans' battalion, to be disbanded. Harris saw thousands of soldiers – English, Scots and Irish – lining the streets, "and lounging about before the different public-houses, with every description of wound and casualty incident to modern warfare. There hobbled the maimed Light Infantryman, the heavy dragoon, the hussar, the artillery-man, the fusilier, and specimens from every regiment in the service." A week later he was discharged, receiving his pension of sixpence a day.

The relief of British families seeing fathers, sons and brothers out of uniform at last was matched by that of countless French prisoners of war. As the Peterborough newspapers reported: "The joy

Napoleon's return from exile on Elba came as a nasty shock to many Britons





Joseph Beaume's painting shows Napoleon leaving the island of Elba, on which he had been exiled, to return to France. This turn of events propelled many Britons, who had been glorying in the Corsican's 'defeat', into a state of blind panic



# NAPOLÉON.

This caricature shows Napoleon – in exile on the Atlantic island of St Helena – before and after his fall from power. The Corsican had haunted Britons' nightmares for over a decade.



## WHAT HE WAS. | WHAT HE IS.

produced among the prisoners of war at Norman Cross by the change of affairs in France is quite indescribably extravagant. A large white flag is set up in each of the quadrangles of the depot, under which the thousands of poor fellows, for years in confinement, dance, sing, laugh and cry for joy, with rapturous delight."

It was different for the French officers. Several had been on parole around Melrose, where the novelist Walter Scott had been hospitable to them: "Many of them," Scott wrote, "companions of Buonaparte's victories, and who hitherto have marched with him from conquest to conquest, disbelieve the change entirely."

But the change was true. On 30 May the Peace of Paris restored France to the borders of 1792 (when the French Revolutionary Wars erupted), with slight adjustments. In June the allied sovereigns, Frederick William III of Prussia, Tsar Alexander of Russia and Metternich, the Austrian chancellor, with the heads of German states and several generals, paid a state visit to London. The

whole route from Dover was illuminated, and the artist Thomas Sidney Cooper, then aged 10, remembered flags hung across the streets in Canterbury and how the wounded soldiers following the procession "were treated and cheered by the populace, who smoked and drank with them; and the city was kept in a state of conviviality and uproar until midnight".

### Green pantaloons

In London, windows along the route were let for huge sums, bakers ran out of bread and the cows in Hyde Park were spooked by the cheers, and produced no milk. When a grand ball was held at Burlington House, Betsey Fremantle, the young wife of a naval commander, gasped at the splendour: "The rooms were brilliant, and looked like a fairy palace... 2,000 people set down without any inconvenience or confusion. I stayed till seven o'clock in the morning and met almost everybody I know in London."

This was rivalled by a masquerade at Water's, to which Byron went dressed as

a monk, while politician Cam Hobhouse put on Byron's Albanian robes and Lady Caroline Lamb appeared in mask and domino (carnival mask), flashing her green pantaloons.

All spring and summer, across the country there were tables in the streets plus sports and dancing on village greens. In Oldham, wrote the weaver William Rowbottom, "the different manufacturers gave dinners and ale to their respective work people who paraded the streets with musick and flags with different devices. A pair of looms were drawn in a cart where a person was weaving callico and a person representing Bonaparte was winding... ale &c flowed in the greatest profusion."

Every town had such stories. Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk held a feast for 4,000 poor people from 20 miles around: "The whole of the meat was prepared a day or two before & of course was designed to be cold," explained James Oakes, "the plum puddings hot. The tables were set all thro the butter market, on the beest market & round the theatre."



In Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, there was "a grand emblematical procession" including an effigy of the fallen emperor labelled 'Going to Elba'. In the small Devon town of Ashburton, parole prisoners joined local guilds in a parade with "Fifty flower girls, haymakers and agriculturalists, woollen manufacturers", ending with "Britannia in triumphal car drawn by four horses abreast".

Not everyone enjoyed the celebrations. The journalist William Cobbett saw them as a form of hysteria and thundered against the balls and processions, "from the solemn and gawdy buffoonery of the freemasons down to the little ragged children at the Lancashire schools... Upwards of 2,000 oxen were roasted whole and upwards of 2,000 sheep. One boundless scene of extravagance and waste, and idleness and dissipation pervaded the whole kingdom, and the people appeared to be all raving drunk, all raving mad."

All too soon, however, they were sober again. As winter closed in, hunger stalked the poor. In the new year, while delegates to the Congress of Vienna waited to formalise the terms of the peace, unemployed soldiers haunted British roads. The farmers, who had made big profits during the war, worried as the price of corn fell. In March 1815, during the final stages of a bill to ban imports when the home price of wheat fell below 80 shillings a quarter, mobs gathered outside ministers' houses, tearing down railings and scrawling 'Bread or Blood' on the walls.

At the same time, on Friday 10 March, James Oakes of Bury St Edmunds wrote a worried entry in his diary. "This morning by mail the acct came of Bonaparte's making good his landing in France with 10 or 12,000 men." After slipping away from exile in Elba, Napoleon had landed 10 days earlier near the Mediterranean port of Antibes, with 600 men.

Suddenly the national mood swung back towards panic. Every day there were new and contradictory reports: that Napoleon had reached Lyon and most of the army and navy had defected to him, that his troops were deserting, "& great hopes were entertain'd there Bonaparte would be surrounded & brot a prisoner, dead or alive, to Paris", scribbled Oakes. But on Good Friday, the 24th, he wrote solemnly: "The London papers this morning announced the arrival of Bonaparte at Paris on Monday last, 20th Inst, without opposition. Not a gun fired." Napoleon was back in power.

Mary Hutchinson, from her family's farm in Radnorshire, wrote to her relative Tom, that they had sent to town to find a newspaper "to satisfy us on the report we have had of B. having entered Paris. It was terrible not



A c1819 painting shows Chelsea Pensioners receiving tidings of the victory at Waterloo. The news would be music to a war-weary nation's ears

## When the ship carrying Bonaparte anchored in Torbay and Plymouth, crowds packed the shore or rowed out to see him

to have a paper, at such a time as this when we are all anxiety – we have not had one since the 13th and therefore are in utter darkness probably made more gloomy by reports which are afloat in the neighbourhood... What can these wise emperors & kings think of themselves now, for giving such a tyranny an opportunity of once more bringing misery upon the world when they had it in them to destroy him."

More than half the farmers, she thought, who "think of themselves alone and look no further than the present would be most happy to have war again". But most people were full of dismay, foreseeing more taxes, more hardship, more deaths. Soldiers like Benjamin Harris were hauled back to their regiments: 30,000 troops converged on Canterbury and marched to Deal, to board ships waiting in the Downs.

For the next two months, the British public tried to keep track of the fighting taking place in Flanders and around the Rhine. Spring passed and June was fine and

hot. Across the country the harvest began and the London elite got ready to leave for the countryside. Then, around 19 June, rumours began to spread in the city from Channel couriers of three days of fighting around Waterloo, south of Brussels.

Late on 21 June, Wellington's exhausted aide, Henry Percy, arrived in London. Next morning the *Morning Chronicle* declared "TOTAL DEFEAT OF BONAPARTE: We stop the press to announce the most brilliant and complete victory ever obtained by the Duke of Wellington and which will forever exalt the glory of the British name."

### Scene of carnage

But while the public illuminations were grander than ever, letters home from soldiers were sad and grim – "how anyone escaped alive out that scene of carnage is strange," wrote James Stanhope of the Foot Guards. Over the coming months hundreds of British visitors toured the battlefield, bringing back trophies – a button, a bullet, a letter, a skull.

The papers reported that Bonaparte had dashed back to Paris to raise a new army. But at Rochefort on 15 July, he surrendered to Captain Maitland of HMS *Bellerophon*. When the ship anchored in Torbay and then in Plymouth, crowds packed the shore or rowed out to see him. Sailors hung out placards saying that Bonaparte was at breakfast, or in his cabin.

On one of these was General George Dyer of the marines, who noted every detail, from Napoleon's white pantaloons to his thinning hair and "fix'd steady look". "When I reflected on the wonderful events that had taken place," he wrote, "I could scarcely believe [while looking at Bonaparte] that I actually saw this man who had caused so much blood to be spilt and so much misery to all Europe and that he was at the moment a prisoner in a British man of war, in an English port – But alas! How inscrutable are the ways of Providence."

Ten days later, on Friday 11 August 1815, Napoleon sailed on the *Northumberland* to his final banishment on St Helena. In Britain there were hard years ahead, but for the moment – after the exhilaration of 1814, the panic at Napoleon's return, and the emotions aroused by Waterloo – the whole nation shared Dyer's dazed astonishment that, finally, the long war was over. **■**

Jenny Uglow is a historian and biographer. Her books include *In These Times. Living in Britain Through Napoleon's Wars, 1793–1815* (Faber & Faber, 2014)

## Napoleon's achievements

Baron Antoine-Jean Gros's painting shows Napoleon visiting the battlefield at Eylau on 9 February 1807. When asked who was the greatest captain of the age, the Duke of Wellington immediately replied: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon".





# Why Napoleon merits the title ‘The Great’

The Corsican's military genius has overshadowed his astonishing achievements as an enlightened ruler, who transformed the physical, legal, political and cultural landscape of Europe. **Andrew Roberts** argues that unfair comparisons with Hitler have given the founder of modern France a bad press

**W**hat are the criteria that win a ruler that most coveted of soubriquets: 'the Great'? Alexander, Alfred, Charles, Peter, Frederick

and Catherine were all huge figures who decisively influenced the history of their times. Yet it's not difficult to think of others who were equally influential, and indeed often rather better human beings (at least by modern standards) who haven't made the cut. Frederick Barbarossa, Henry V, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Queen Elizabeth I, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, 'the Sun King' Louis XIV, and so on, probably deserved it too. I believe that foremost among them is Napoleon Bonaparte.

Napoleon was occasionally referred to as 'the Great' in his lifetime. Some public buildings sported the phrase, and it can still be seen on the pedestal of the Vendôme Column in Paris. When Louvre director Vivant Denon dedicated his 21-volume work *Description of Egypt* in the early 19th century, the title page said "Napoleon Le Grand". But it never caught on, even as a way of differentiating Napoleon from his distinctly less impressive nephew Emperor Napoleon III.

### From refugee to reformer

Yet Napoleon I was the founder of modern France and one of the great conquerors of history. He came to power through a military coup only six years after entering the country as a penniless political refugee, and eventually gave his name to an age. As first consul and later emperor, he almost won hegemony in Europe, but was eventually overwhelmed by a series of coalitions put together to bring him down. Although his conquests ended in defeat and ignominious imprisonment, over the course of his short but eventful life he fought 60 battles and lost only seven. For any general, of any age, this was an extraordinary record.

Napoleon's capacity for battlefield decision-making was astounding. Having walked the ground of 53 of his 60 battles, I was amazed by his genius for topography, his acuity and sense of timing. A general must ultimately be judged by the outcome of the battles, and of Napoleon's 60 battles and sieges he lost only Acre, Aspern-Essling, Leipzig, La Rothière, Lâon, Arcis sur Aube and Waterloo. When asked who was the greatest captain of the age, the Duke of Wellington – who, after all, defeated him brilliantly in the only battle they fought – replied without hesitation: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon."



Napoleon holds the figure of Victory in this plaque marking the French army's clash with Russian empire forces at Eylau

The present tendency to equate Napoleon with Adolf Hitler – the other dictator who wanted to invade Britain but was defeated by a coalition of allies after coming to grief in Russia – has now gone so far that it is probably impossible to resuscitate the title 'the Great' for Napoleon, who was in fact nothing like the führer. In the course of my six years of research I realised that our view of Napoleon has been hopelessly compromised by seeing him through the distorting prism of the Second World War. For here was a talented, humorous, emotionally generous and forgiving man with great ideals who emancipated the Jews and had nothing personally in common with Hitler. Their dictatorships were utterly different, as were their invasions of Russia. Far from pursuing *Lebensraum* and extermination, Napoleon only wanted to fight a short border war in Russia.

In Britain, which had already had its political revolution 140 years earlier and already enjoyed most of the benefits that the revolution brought to France, Napoleon's threat to invade ensured that successive

British governments were rightly determined to overthrow him. Their decrying of his imperialism was pure hypocrisy, however, given that Britain herself was busily building a vast empire at the time. Napoleon boasted that he was "of the race that founds empires" (meaning France rather than Corsica). But the desire for territorial expansion was hardly unique to him – in living European memory Louis XIV, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great, Joseph II of Austria and Gustav III of Sweden had all undertaken it, and across the Atlantic the United States was starting to expand westwards (largely thanks to Napoleon who allowed them to secure the Louisiana Purchase in 1803).

Napoleon's achievements as a lawgiver equalled his military achievements, and far outlasted them. Whereas France had been forced back to its pre-Napoleonic frontiers by the end of 1815, many of his civil reforms stayed in place. The Napoleonic Code forms the basis of much of European law today, while various aspects of it have been adopted by 40 countries on all six inhabited continents. Napoleon's architectural and construction projects (once finished under later reigns), are the glory of Paris, and many of his bridges, reservoirs, canals, sewers and quais along the Seine are still in use.

The Cour des Comptes still oversees France's public accounts, just as the Conseil d'État still vets her laws. Napoleon's Banque de France is the central bank; the Légion d'Honneur is much coveted, just as France's best lycées still deliver first-class education. The 'masses of granite' that Napoleon boasted of throwing down to anchor French society are there to this day, so even if he had not been one of the great military geniuses of history, he would still be a giant of the modern era. When Napoleon's mother was complimented on her son's achievements, she replied: "So long as it lasts." It has.

The reason is that Napoleon consciously built upon and protected the best aspects of the French Revolution, while discarding the worst. "We have done with the romance of the revolution," he told an early meeting of his Council of State. "We must now commence its history." Yet for his reforms to work they needed one commodity that Europe's monarchs were determined to deny him. Time. "Chemists have a species of powder out of which they can make marble," he said, "but it must have time to become solid."

Because many of the revolution's principles threatened the absolute monarchies of Russia (which was to practise serfdom until 1861), Austria and Prussia, and because the disruption of the balance of power on the continent threatened Britain, they formed

**Napoleon believed that Europeans were on the cusp of the most important scientific and cultural developments since the Renaissance**



seven coalitions over 23 years to crush revolutionary and Napoleonic France.

Yet many of the ideas that underpin our modern world – meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances, and so on – were protected, consolidated, codified and geographically extended by Napoleon during his 16 years in power, and could therefore not be reined back by the Bourbons (the French royal house) on their return to power after his fall. Napoleon also dispensed with hyper-inflation, the unsustainable revolutionary calendar of 10-day weeks, the absurd theology of the Cult of the Supreme Being (established by Maximilien Robespierre following the Revolution) and the corruption and cronyism of the previous Directory government of France.

Napoleon represented the Enlightenment on horseback. His letters show a charm, humour and capacity for candid self-appraisal. He could lose his temper – volcanically so on occasion – but usually with some cause. Above all, he was no totalitarian: he had no interest in controlling every aspect of his subjects' lives. Of course there were great costs. Like much of the rest of Europe of the day, Napoleon employed censorship and a secret police. The plebiscites he held seemingly to give the French people a political voice were regularly rigged.

And then there was the cost in lives. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars cost a total of around three million military and one million civilian deaths, of whom 1.4 million were French.

Yet although Napoleon is accused of being an inveterate warmonger, the Allies declared war on him far more often than he did on them. The wars had been going on since he was a lieutenant of artillery in 1792, of course, but once he was in power the British declared war on him in 1803, the Austrians invaded his ally Bavaria in 1805, the Prussians declared war on him in 1806 and the Austrians in 1809. The attacks on Portugal and Spain in 1807 and 1808 and Russia in 1812 were indeed initiated by Napoleon, although Russia was planning an attack on him in 1812.

But the two campaigns of 1813, the war of 1814, and also that of 1815, were initiated by his enemies, and he made genuine and on occasion impassioned peace offers before all of them. He made no fewer than four separate and genuine peace offers to Britain between the 1803 collapse of the Treaty of Amiens (which ended war between Britain and France) and 1812. Considering that he had planned to invade Britain between 1803 and 1805, it was understandable that the British government should have relentlessly

Jacques-Louis David's famous portrait of the French emperor in his study at the Tuileries, 1812. "Many of the ideas that underpin our modern world were protected and codified by Napoleon," says Andrew Roberts.





## 1 Grand ideas

An allegory of the French Revolution featuring a portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose political philosophy greatly influenced the revolutionaries – and the young Napoleon

## 2 Educating girls

Napoleon established two lycées – including one in St Denis, shown above – to educate the orphaned daughters of members of the Légion d'Honneur, France's highest decoration

## 3 Empire builder

"Your heart be in your breeches," a doctor observes as he examines Napoleon in this 1809 London cartoon. Much of the criticism directed at Napoleon's militarism was hypocritical, says Andrew Roberts "given that Britain herself was busily building a vast empire"





pursued his destruction; similarly Austria, Prussia and Russia had impeccable motives for wanting to destroy him. But he cannot be fairly accused of being the only, or even the principal, warmonger of the age.

Napoleon's personality was far more attractive than those who persist in seeing similarities with Hitler will admit. His intellect places him in the front ranks of monarchs, alongside Marcus Aurelius and Elizabeth I. Goethe himself said that Napoleon was "always enlightened by reason... He was in a permanent state of enlightenment." A child of the Enlightenment who became an exponent of the rationalism of Rousseau and Voltaire as a youth, Napoleon believed that Europeans were on the cusp of the most important scientific and cultural developments since the Renaissance. His correspondence with astronomers, chemists, mathematicians and biologists expressed a respect for their work to be expected from a member of the Institut, the headquarters of the French Enlightenment of which he was so proud to have been elected a member.

### **His restless, questing energy**

Napoleon's success came as much from hard work, profound thinking and forward planning as from any inherent genius. "I'm always working, and I meditate a great deal," he told his minister Pierre Louis Roederer in March 1809. "If I appear always ready to answer for everything and to meet everything, it's because, before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for a long time, and have foreseen what might happen. It's not genius which reveals to me suddenly, secretly, what I have to say or do in a circumstance unexpected by other people: it is reflection, meditation."

Had Napoleon exhibited a scintilla of Hitler's viciousness, men who kept betraying him such as his minister of police, Joseph Fouché, and his chief diplomat, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, would hardly have died in their beds. The fact that we can count the number of people Napoleon executed for political reasons on the fingers of one hand shows how different he was from a dictator who exterminated millions for both political and racial reasons (though this is not to excuse Napoleon's massacre of 4,400 Turkish prisoners at Jaffa in March 1799, which he ordered out of perceived military necessity. They had broken their parole and their lives were forfeit under the rules of war of the day, but it was still a grossly ruthless act.)

Napoleon was able to compartmentalise his life to quite a remarkable degree, much more so than most statesmen and great leaders. He could close off one part of his

## **Napoleon's success came as much from hard work, profound thinking and forward planning as from any inherent genius**

mind to what was going on in the rest of it, likening it to being able to open and close drawers in a cupboard. On the eve of battle, as aides-de-camp were arriving and departing with orders to his marshals and reports from his generals, he could dictate his thoughts on the establishment of a girls' school for the orphans of members of the Légion d'Honneur, and shortly after having captured Moscow he set down the regulations governing the Comédie-Française.

The recent publication of 33,000 of his letters – he averaged 15 a day when in power – shows how no detail about his empire was too minute for his restless, questing energy. The prefect of a department would be instructed to stop taking his young mistress to the opera; an obscure country priest would be reprimanded for giving a bad sermon on his birthday; a corporal told he was drinking too much; a demi-brigade that it could stitch the words "Les Incomparables" in gold onto its standard. He was one of the most unrelenting micromanagers in history, but this obsession with details did not prevent him from radically transforming the physical, legal, political and cultural landscape of Europe.

Napoleon also had a fine sense of humour and was able to make jokes in virtually any situation, even when staring defeat in the face during battle. He was ambitious, of course, but when allied to tremendous talents – extraordinary energy; administrative genius; a huge capacity for statistical data; what appears to be a near-photographic memory; a disciplined, incisive mind capable of compartmentalising ideas; astonishing attention to detail – it would have been surprising, even unnatural, for his ambitions to be small.

Much has been written about his religious views, his Corsicanness, his absorption of Rousseau and Voltaire, but it was the years he spent in military schooling that affected him most, and it was from the ethos of the army that he took on most of

his beliefs. Thus his enthusiastic acceptance in 1789 of the revolutionary principles of equality before the law, rational government, meritocracy, efficiency and aggressive nationalism all fitted in well with his assumptions about what would work well for the French army.

By contrast, social disorder, political and press liberty and parliamentarianism all struck him as at odds with the military ethic. The army schools imbued him with a reverence for social hierarchy, law and order, the reward of merit and courage, and a contempt for self-serving politicians.

### **Deep difficulties overcome**

Of course Napoleon's abilities led to some excesses, but even his brother Louis, who he deposed as king of Holland, eventually came to say: "Let us reflect upon the difficulties Napoleon had to overcome, the innumerable enemies, both external as well as internal, he had to combat, the snares of all kinds which were laid for him on every side, the continual tension of his mind, his incessant activity, the extraordinary fatigues he had to encounter, and criticism will soon be absorbed by admiration."

All too often, biographies of Napoleon adopt the suspiciously easy trope by which his deranged hubris – tied up with what has erroneously become known as 'the Napoleon Complex' – inevitably led to his well-deserved nemesis. This clichéd paradigm of ancient Greek drama sometimes comes with the comforting suggestion that such is the fate that overtakes all tyrants sooner or later. My own interpretation is very different from other historians'. What brought Napoleon down was not some deep-seated personality disorder but a combination of unforeseeable circumstances coupled with a handful of significant miscalculations: something altogether more believable, human and fascinating.

Napoleon's career is a standing rebuke to the determinist analyses of history, which explain events in terms of vast impersonal forces and minimise the part played by great men and women. We should find this uplifting, since, as George Home, a midshipman on board the ship, HMS *Bellerophon*, where Napoleon surrendered to the British, was to put it in his memoirs: "He showed us what one little human creature like ourselves could accomplish in a span so short." Of course, therefore, he deserves to be called 'Napoleon the Great' ■

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**Andrew Roberts** is a historian who has written a number of acclaimed books including *Napoleon the Great* (Allen Lane, 2014) and *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (Allen Lane, 2018)

# WATERLOO & BEYOND

REVIEWS BY

A painting imagined  
European statesmen  
gathered at the  
Congress of Vienna,  
which sought to  
resolve issues arising  
from the years of war  
against France.



## Events that decided Waterloo's winner

10 key moments that helped determine the outcome

## The historians' verdict

Experts reflect on some big questions relating to the battle of Waterloo and

its aftermath

## Wellington's mastery

The achievements of this commander owe as much to his political skills as to his brilliance on the battlefield

## The ex-emperor in exile

For the former leader of France, the final battle was against isolation and depression in exile on St Helena

## A global conflict

European opponents were imperial powers with interests in distant corners of the world

## The Congress of Vienna


How the haggling over Europe's borders shaped the political consequences for the future



# WATERLOO

## 10 moments that decided the campaign

Biblical weather, incredible bravery, inspired acts of initiative and no-shows. **Julian Humphrys** looks at some of the key events that determined the course of the clash at Waterloo



Denis Dighton's painting shows the defeat of Napoleon's Imperial Guard at Waterloo. By the end of 18 June 1815, after a series of bloody clashes between French and allied forces, Napoleon's career was finally over.





Napoleon made a mistake in leaving Davout, his best general, at home

## 1 6 JUNE 1815 Napoleon gives Marshal Davout a desk job

All commanders need a good chief of staff to ensure that their intentions are translated into clear orders. Unfortunately for Napoleon, as what is arguably one of the most decisive battles in European history loomed, his trusted chief of staff, Marshal Berthier, was no longer available. Berthier had sworn an oath of loyalty to Louis XVIII – and then fallen to his death from a window – so the job was given to Marshal Soult.

Soult was an experienced field commander but he was certainly no Berthier. Napoleon's two main field commanders were a so far from ideal. Emmanuel Grouchy had little experience of independent command. Michel Ney's

heroic command of the French rear-guard during the retreat from Moscow had earned Napoleon to dub him "the bravest of the brave", but by 1815 he was clearly burnt out.

Worse still, when on 6 June Napoleon ordered his generals to assemble with their troops on the Belgian border he chose to leave behind Louis-Nicolas Davout, his 'Iron Marshal', as minister of war. The emperor needed someone loyal to oversee affairs at home but the decision not to take with him the ablest general at his disposal would deprive him of the one commander who might have made a difference.

## 2 15 JUNE 1815 Constant Rebecque ignores orders

In June 1815 Napoleon assembled 120,000 men on the Belgian border. Opposing him were 115,000 Prussians under Field Marshal Blücher and an allied force of about 93,000 men under Wellington. Faced with such odds, Napoleon's best chance of victory was to get his army between his two enemies and defeat one before turning on the other. On 15 June his army crossed the frontier at Charleroi and headed

straight for the gap between the two allied armies.

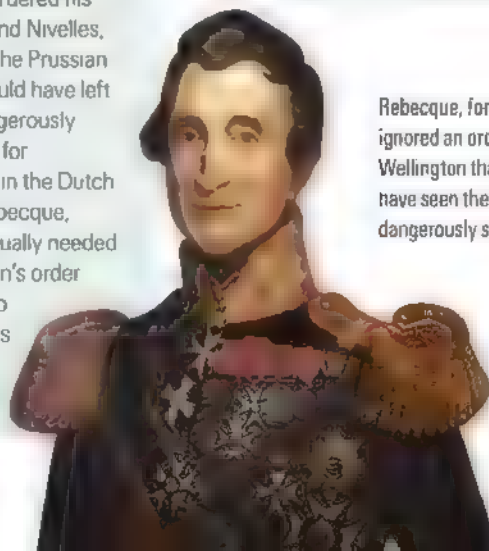
Wellington was taken completely by surprise: "Napoleon has humbugged me" he said. Uncertain what Napoleon's intentions were, he ordered his army to concentrate around Nivelles, over 12 miles away from the Prussian position at Ligny. This would have left the two allied armies dangerously separated but fortunately for Wellington, a staff officer in the Dutch army, Baron Constant Rebecque, understood what was actually needed. He disregarded Wellington's order and instead sent a force to occupy the key crossroads of Quatre Bras, much nearer to the Prussians.



Napoleon at Ligny, where a disastrous mix-up meant that 16,000 French troops wasted time marching from one part of the battlefield to another

## 3 16 JUNE 1815 D'Erlon misses the show

Two battles were fought on 16 June. While Marshal Ney took on Wellington's army as it hurriedly tried to concentrate around Quatre Bras, Napoleon led the main French force against the Prussians at Ligny. Blücher's inexperienced Prussians were given a severe mauling but despite this they managed to fall back in relatively good order. This was partly due to a disastrous mix-up on the part of the French. Confusion over orders saw General D'Erlon's corps instructed to leave Ney's army at Quatre Bras and join the fighting at Ligny only to be recalled as soon as they got there. The result was that 16,000 Frenchmen who could have intervened decisively actually took part in neither battle.



Rebecque, fortunately, ignored an order from Wellington that would have seen the allies dangerously separated

## 4 **17 JUNE 1815** **Blücher** **stays in touch**

Wellington succeeded in beating back Ney at Quatre Bras but Blücher's defeat left the British general with a large French army on his eastern flank. He was forced to fall back northwards towards Brussels. The Prussians were retreating as well. Normally a retreating army tries to withdraw along its lines of communication (ie the route back to its base). Had the Prussians done this they would have headed eastwards. The two allied armies would then have been even further apart and Wellington would have been overwhelmed. But instead of doing that, the Prussians retreated northwards towards Wavre. It was to be a crucial move. The two allied armies stayed in contact and on 17 June, Wellington was able to fall back to the ridge at Mont-Saint-Jean, and prepare to make a stand there until Blücher's Prussians could come to his aid.

## 5 **17 JUNE 1815** **The weather** **takes a hand**

The night before the battle was marked by a thunderstorm of biblical proportions. Rain lashed down, turning roads into quagmires and trampled fields into seas of mud. Private Wheeler of the 51st Regiment wrote, "The ground was too wet to lie down... the water ran in streams from the cuffs of our Jack-jets. We had one consolation, we knew that the enemy were in the same plight." Wheeler was right, of course – the rain would inconvenience all three armies, not least the Prussians as they struggled along narrow lanes to link up with Wellington.

It's often said that Napoleon delayed starting the battle in order to allow the ground to dry out but the chief cause of the delay was probably the need to allow his units, many of whom had bivouacked some distance away, to take up their allotted places. Napoleon enjoyed a considerable advantage in artillery at Waterloo but this was lessened by the fact that the mud made it difficult to move his guns around and that cannonballs, normally designed to bounce along until they hit something, or someone, often disappeared harmlessly into the soggy ground.

The allied defence of Hougoumont was crucial to the victory



## 6 **11:30AM, 18 JUNE 1815** **Macdonnell closes the gates**

On 18 June the armies prepared to do battle. Most of Wellington's troops were sheltered from enemy fire on the reverse slope of the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge. The position was protected by three important outposts: a group of farms to the left, the farm of La Haye Sainte in front and the farmhouse of Hougoumont to the right. At about 11.30am the French launched their first attack – an assault on Hougoumont. This soon developed into a battle within a battle as the French threw in ever more men in a bid to capture the vital chateau. They nearly succeeded, led by a giant officer nicknamed 'the Smasher', a group of French soldiers worked their way round to the rear of the chateau, forced open its north gate and burst inside.

James Macdonnell, the garrison commander, acted quickly. He gathered a group of men and they heaved the gate shut again. The French inside the chateau were then hunted down and killed. Only a young drummer boy was spared. Hougoumont was to remain in allied hands all day and Wellington later commented that the entire result of the battle depended on the closing of those gates.

## 7 **1:30PM, 18 JUNE 1815** **Ney loses his head after** **his cavalry founders**

The infantry of D'Erlon's corps finally saw action as they attacked the left wing of Wellington's army. As they reached the crest of the ridge they were met by the infantry of Sir Thomas Picton's division. Picton, a foul-mouthed Welshman who rode into battle in a civilian coat and round-brimmed hat, was shot dead but his men stopped the French, who were then driven back by Wellington's cavalry.

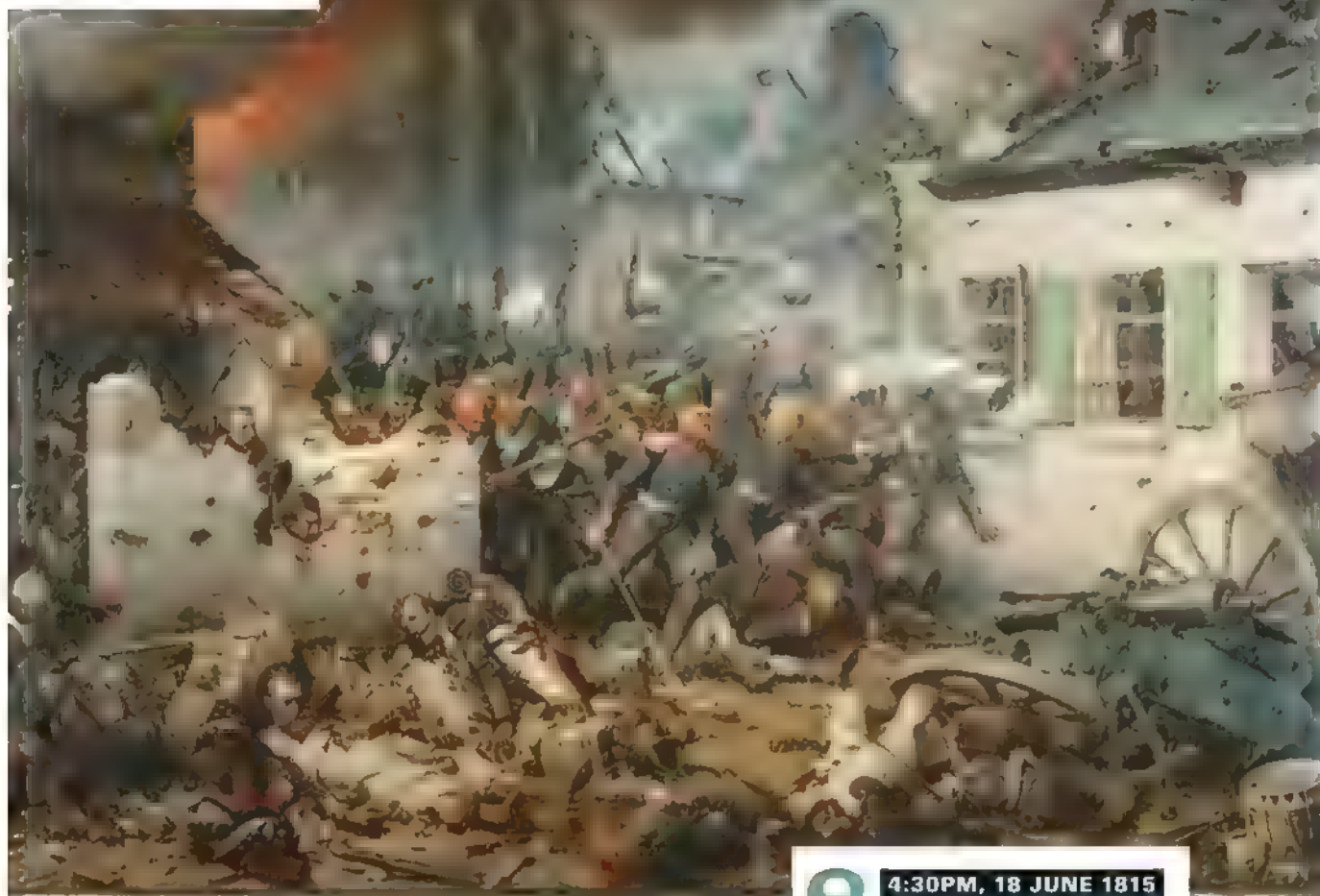
The next major French attack was very different. Ney unleashed his cavalry in a mass frontal attack, and thousands of Napoleon's famous cuirassiers – big

men in steel breastplates riding big horses – thundered up the hill. But Wellington's infantry stayed calm. Forming squares, they presented in all directions a hedge of bayonets that no horse could be made to charge.

Ney needed to call the cavalry off or support them with infantry but he lost his head and threw more horsemen into the fray. When he abandoned these fruitless attacks, Wellington's line was still unbroken, two hours had been wasted, and the Prussians were arriving in force.



The Prussians' fierce attack on Napoleon's rear at Plancenoit – shown in an 1863 painting – helped reduce the pressure on Wellington's line



8

4:30PM, 18 JUNE 1815

## The Prussians arrive

Blucher had promised to come to Wellington's aid, and kept his word. Napoleon had detached nearly a third of his army under Grouchy to prevent the Prussians joining up with Wellington but Grouchy failed to do this and, by mid-afternoon, the first Prussian units were in action on the battlefield. At about 4.30pm they launched the first attack upon the key village of Plancenoit near the rear of Napoleon's main position. This savage battle would rage for over three hours. Faced with this, Napoleon was forced to send many of his remaining reserves to shore up his position – leaving him with precious few troops to exploit any success his troops might enjoy against Wellington.

## How the campaign unfolded



**By mid-afternoon, the first Prussian units were in action on the battlefield... This savage battle would rage for over three hours**



BRIDGEMAN/GETTY IMAGES

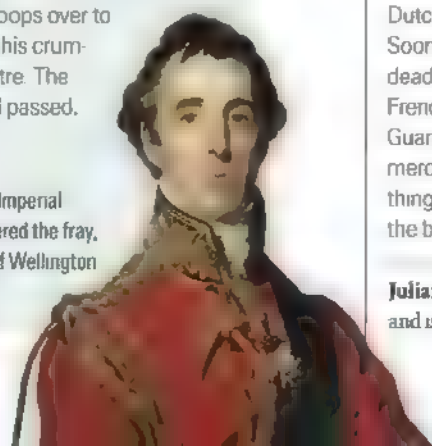
## 9 6:30PM, 18 JUNE 1815 Napoleon says no, and Zieten turns back

At 6.30pm the French finally captured the farm of La Haye Sainte and unleashed a storm of shot, shell and musketry into Wellington's exposed centre. The regiments there suffered horrendous casualties, but Wellington's line held – just.

Key asked for reinforcements to press home his advantage but Napoleon refused. Instead he sent troops to recapture Plancenoit which had just fallen to the Prussians. Lieutenant-General von Zieten's Prussian I Corps arrived on the scene. These much-needed reinforcements were set to join Wellington when a Prussian aide de camp rode up with an order from Bücher instructing them to support his

troops at Plancenoit. Zieten obeyed. Realising that Zieten's troops were desperately needed on the ridge, Baron von Muffling, Wellington's Prussian liaison officer, galloped after Zieten and pleaded with him to ignore this new order and stick to the plan. The Prussian general turned back and took his place on Wellington's left, enabling the duke to shift troops over to reinforce his crumbling centre. The crisis had passed.

When the Imperial Guard entered the fray, the Duke of Wellington was ready



## 10 7:30PM, 18 JUNE 1815 Napoleon's last roll of the dice ends in panic

With Plancenoit back in French hands the stage was set for the final act in the drama. At about 7.30pm Napoleon unleashed his elite imperial guard in a last desperate bid for victory. But it was too late – they were hopelessly outnumbered and Wellington was ready for them. His own troops had been sheltering from the French fire by lying down, but when the two large columns of French guardsmen reached the crest of the ridge, Wellington ordered his own guards to stand up. One British guardsman described the scene: "Whether it was (our) sudden appearance so near to them, or the tremendously heavy fire we threw into them but La Garde, who had never previously failed in an attack, suddenly stopped."

Meanwhile, Sir John Colborne of the 52nd Light Infantry wheeled his regiment round to attack the flank of the first French column while General Chasse ordered his Dutch and Belgian troops forward against the other. Soon both French columns had withered away under the deadly fire. Their defeat led to widespread panic in the French army amid cries of "La Garde recule" ("the Guard is retreating") it dissolved into a disorderly retreat mercilessly harried by the Prussians. "The nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life," as Wellington described the battle, was over. **III**

Julian Humphrys worked at the National Army Museum and is development officer for the Battlefields Trust





**Jeremy Black**

is emeritus professor of history at the University of Exeter



**William Anthony Hay**

is professor of history at Mississippi State University



**Andrew Lambert**

is Laughton Professor of Naval History at King's College London



**Alan Forrest**

is emeritus professor of modern history at the University of York

Wellington's great victory at Waterloo in 1815 marked the final defeat of Napoleon. A panel of historians reflect on some of the big questions relating to the battle and its consequences

BRIDGE MAN/FOTOBUDDY

# Waterloo

## THE HISTORIANS' VERDICT

Napoleon pictured at the battle of Waterloo, 18 June 1815, where the defeat of his army shattered his hopes of a comeback



**Following his return from Elba, what were Napoleon's military aims?**

**Alan Forrest:** Napoleon aimed to march on Paris and resume control of his empire, though the military and naval resources at his disposal on Elba were tiny and his dream of overthrowing the restoration monarchy [Louis XVIII had been made king during Napoleon's exile] seemed absurdly unrealistic. He must have known that the other European powers would not stand idly by. But it very nearly came off, and his journey back to Paris, gathering support along the way, is surely one of the great romantic stories of the 19th century.

**Andrew Lambert:** Napoleon aimed to keep his throne, by diplomacy if possible, and by force if not. He tried to divide the allies by striking at the British first. The threat to the valuable naval base at Antwerp was guaranteed to get the attention of London at a time when (present day) Belgium was still occupied by British troops.

**How did the European powers ranged against him seek to prevent Napoleon achieving his aims?**

**AF:** A new coalition was formed against Napoleon almost immediately and the war was resumed. Despite the war-weariness of many of the European powers after more than 20 years of near-continuous fighting – Britain and Austria had been almost constantly at war with France since the early 1790s – there was little sign of dissent. Napoleon was a threat to global peace; he had to be stopped.

**Why did Waterloo come to be chosen as the battle location?**

**AL:** Because Napoleon was marching on Antwerp, which was a matter of the first importance to his plans, and Wellington had to stop him before he got there.

**Jeremy Black:** Waterloo was a position that protected Brussels. Wellington chose to fight there because he was promised Prussian assistance.

**Prior to the battle, which of the armies had the strongest chance of victory?**

**AL:** The allies had the bigger force, but Napoleon should have been able to concentrate against one or other and overpower them.

**AF:** They were fairly evenly matched: Wellington commanded around 68,000 men to Napoleon's 72,000. The British Army had improved enormously since 1793 [when war with France began] and gained invaluable

**“Each army had a realistic chance of victory and the outcome remained in doubt for most of the fighting”**

**Alan Forrest**

battle experience in the Peninsular War [fought by France against British, Spanish and Portuguese forces in Iberia from 1808–14]. Although any army led by Napoleon commanded respect, this one was not as strong as those of his heyday. It had been hastily assembled, with many who were just raw recruits.

**Wellington said that the battle of Waterloo was the “nearest run thing you ever saw in your life”. To what extent do you believe that is true?**

**AL:** I believe it was true. Wellington's remarkable leadership and the astonishing endurance of the British and allied infantry under heavy fire and repeated heavy attacks surpassed all other defensive performances against Napoleon, apart from Borodino [a bloody 1812 battle between France and Russia during Napoleon's invasion of Russia].

**AF:** It was closely contested by two armies that each had a realistic chance of victory, and the outcome remained in doubt for most of the fighting. As a result, Wellington's assessment does not seem unjustified. Many people, even in Britain, feared that Napoleon would win – right up to the moment when the news of the victory was brought to London – and public relief led to a huge outburst of joy and celebration.

**Why did Napoleon lose the battle?**

**AF:** Wellington's defensive tactics worked well, pulling the French forward in attack after attack, and Napoleon made tactical errors. The French badly needed extra manpower, yet a part of their army was not engaged in the action. Their tactics were inflexible, relying too much on dense attacks by massed columns. It is hard not to conclude Grouchy and Ney lacked the tactical acumen of marshals who served Napoleon at his victories at Jena (1806) or Austerlitz (1805).

**JB:** Napoleon failed to keep his opponents apart, and seriously and consistently mis-

handled his battle with Wellington. The best French chance on 18 June was at the outset, but there was no real element of manoeuvre to add to brute strength. Arguably, the key mistakes were made by the French prior to the battle, in smaller clashes on 16 and 17 June. On the day itself, Napoleon failed to direct or control his subordinates, the original attack was botched, and, subsequently, direction of the flow of the battle was not regained.

**How important was the individual contribution of Wellington to the victory at Waterloo?**

**AF:** His appreciation of the terrain and his defensive approach to the battle were highly effective, using the ridge of Mont-Saint-Jean to advantage. Wellington planned operations carefully and intelligently, but we should be cautious about suggesting that his personal role was crucial, or that without him the allies could not have won. To do that would be to move into a counterfactual history of the battle, which is impossible to prove.

**AL:** Critical: only a highly experienced defensive tactician like Wellington could have held the field, using the reverse slope, laying his men down to minimise artillery fire, and keeping his counter-attacking options alive.

**JB:** Wellington was 'hands on' operationally and tactically in a way that Napoleon did not try to be. Wellington's 'forward command' style, however, did expose him to considerable personal risk. Wellington showed a degree of resilience that was most impressive. His understanding of terrain was key and he displayed the fortitude and command of the moment that were so important to British success at Waterloo.

**To what extent was this a coalition rather than a British victory?**

**AF:** Waterloo was unquestionably a coalition victory, however important the part played by British troops. The victory owed much to Blücher's timely arrival on the field, the part played by the Prussians was crucial. We should not forget, either, the presence of Dutch troops among the coalition forces, or the role of the King's German Legion in the British Army.

**William Anthony Hay:** Wellington very cleverly presented it as a British victory, even though looking at the larger campaign reminds us that the Prussians fought actions before and after Waterloo. The way in which Wellington managed the politics brings to



Napoleon bids farewell to his Imperial Guard in April 1814, before his exile on Elba. Within a year he had escaped and marched on Paris



Highlanders of the British Army capture an Imperial Eagle from French forces at Waterloo, in a coloured engraving made five years after the battle





mind his tendency to claim credit and downplay the contribution of others.

Beyond the personal, casting Waterloo as a British rather than an Anglo-Dutch or allied victory with Prussian aid, bolstered British diplomatic prestige. Until then, the other powers had carried the main weight of the war with Napoleon in central Europe, with the British fighting at sea and in the Iberian peninsula.

#### How does Waterloo rank among the great battles in history?

**JB:** It was a major battle and a great achievement, but a battle that I believe was most important in its consequences.

**AF:** It was the battle that ended a generation of European and global warfare. For that reason alone it has a rare significance. It was also a very savage and fierce conflict, with casualties high on both sides (around 24,000 killed and wounded on the allied side, over 30,000 on the French). And it was all concentrated into a short time and a limited physical space. All this contributed to its inflated status, at least in Britain.

**AL:** The last battle of a 22-year cycle of conflict was always going to be memorable, even if it had been a damp squib, but Waterloo had everything – a major engagement between experienced commanders that ended with a complete victory. However, eventually the Austrians and Russians would have finished off Napoleon even if he had won at the battle of Waterloo.

#### Can Waterloo be viewed as Napoleon's worst defeat?

**AL:** No, the worst defeat would be at the battle of Leipzig [a decisive allied victory in Saxony in October 1813], which was far more significant. The battle of Waterloo ended a brief resurgence, but the battle of Leipzig ended his empire.

**WAH:** Yes, in so far as Waterloo shattered Napoleon's hopes of sustaining a comeback. Leipzig was a pivotal earlier defeat, but Napoleon managed to recover slightly when the allies reached France and fought impressive defensive actions on his own soil. Napoleon never managed that after Waterloo.

There may have been other battles where Napoleon's errors made for a worse defeat from the perspective of the art of war, but the capacity to recover makes a difference. Waterloo compelled Napoleon to abandon his hopes and rendered his position untenable.



Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, (shown in a portrait by Francisco Goya) displayed remarkable leadership of the British Army at the battle of Waterloo

**“Wellington displayed the fortitude and command of the moment that were so important to success”**

**Jeremy Black**

**AF:** To the extent that it led to his final abdication, I suppose it can. But Napoleon did not fight the battle badly, and he was perhaps unlucky that his planned reinforcements did not arrive when expected, whereas for the allies, Blücher's Prussians did. But his worst defeat? I have to agree with Andrew: in both scale and political significance, Waterloo cannot really compare with Leipzig.

**JB:** To my mind, Napoleon's worst defeat was a strategic one – his ill-fated invasion of Russia in 1812.

#### What do you see as the most important legacy of Waterloo?

**AF:** In the political sphere the battle ensured the defeat of Napoleon's imperial dreams and assured the restoration of the monarchy in France. This left a power balance in Europe that greatly benefited Britain, making her the leading industrial and

imperial power of the Victorian era.

The battle of Waterloo also gave the British Army and its regiments a new confidence and pride: Britain was accustomed to command the seas, but had seldom enjoyed dominance in land battles.

**WAH:** Wellington's decisive victory ended abruptly Napoleon's Hundred Days [the period from his return from Elba to the second restoration of King Louis XVIII after Waterloo] while enabling the duke to manage the politics of the allied occupation that followed to bring a stable peace.

The Earl of Liverpool, Britain's prime minister, had privately remarked that any war at that time would be a revolutionary war and that Europe needed time for things to return to their normal course so that wars would not risk such upheaval. Wellington's victory at the battle of Waterloo won Europe that period of time.

#### How has our understanding of the battle changed in subsequent years?

**AL:** The focus on tactics has faded, but the meaning of the event has become more significant.

**AF:** In the immediate aftermath of the battle the British government claimed it as a specifically British victory; there were public celebrations and memorials to Wellington and the battle. The Waterloo Medal was issued to all the soldiers who had taken part. Wellington clearly manipulated public opinion on this issue, but with time it has been appreciated that the battle was a truly joint effort, as much a Prussian victory as a British one.

#### More than two centuries later, what is there still to discover about the battle of Waterloo?

**AF:** The details of tactics and strategy have been dissected thoroughly over the years, but historians are now asking different questions about war and the battles that are its most dramatic moments.

These are questions about soldiers' morale and motives in war; issues of gender and military masculinity; the place of the battle in the national memory of the states represented on the battlefield and its contrasting roles in their national identities.

**JB:** The key element to be handled adequately is what happened afterwards in the campaign, for both the British and Prussians, and why the French regime collapsed so rapidly. ■

Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, was a brilliant tactician, both on and off the battlefields of Europe.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** Wellington is often remembered as primarily a defensive general, but as his masterpiece in Salamanca in 1812 demonstrated, he was also a skilful practitioner of offensive warfare.





# WELLINGTON'S MASTERY

The Duke of Wellington was renowned for his military genius, especially his victory over Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. But, argues **Gary Sheffield**, the achievements of this superb commander owe as much to his political skills as to his brilliance on the battlefield



**A**t nightfall on 18 June 1815, Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, stood at the pinnacle of his military career.

The battle of Waterloo was over and Napoleon's army had been decisively defeated.

Wellington's men had withstood repeated assaults from the French, weathering a series of crises: the initial French attack, that had seemed sure to break through until a combination of firepower and a timely counterstroke had pushed Napoleon's columns back; the massed cavalry charges that raged around the beleaguered squares of infantry; the loss of the crucial farm of La Haye Sainte.

The Duke had shown his mastery of the battlefield. Riding up and down the lines and squares of troops, he somehow always contrived to be in the right place at the right time, coolly giving orders, the extreme tension he must have been feeling revealed by anxious glances at his pocket watch. He was there to give the order to the British Guards when they repulsed Napoleon's final throw, the attack of his Imperial Guard. Victory was very far from certain, as he himself later acknowledged.

Wellington was far more than a skilful battlefield general. He was perhaps the most complete commander that the British army has ever produced, a master of strategy, tactics, intelligence and logistics – and, not least, politics.

The Waterloo campaign was almost as much a test of his political as his military skills. Wellington commanded an army composed of troops from the Netherlands and the German states of Hanover, Nassau and Brunswick, as well as British forces; indeed British soldiers were in the minority. As well as holding this polyglot coalition army together, Wellington had to cooperate with his allies, the Prussians. The essence of his strategy at Waterloo was to hold firm until the Prussian Field-Marshal Blücher's army arrived on the field. The Anglo-Prussian coalition was a marriage of convenience rather than a love-match. Although Wellington's conduct towards the Prussians has been criticised by some recent historians, the fact is that while both sides had their national interests at heart, Wellington and the Prussian leaders made the coalition work.

### Courting controversy

In 2006 General Sir Richard Dannatt, the professional head of the British Army, courted controversy with comments that were seen as critical of Tony Blair's govern-



The future Duke of Wellington as Lt Col of the 33rd Regiment, aged about 28

## A LEADER'S STORY

From an uninspired start grew a shining military career

As a child, Wellington showed no sign of greatness. Born of Anglo-Irish aristocracy, in 1769, he admitted being a "dreamy, idle and shy lad". His mother said, "I don't know what I shall do with my awkward son Arthur". He was "fodder for [gun] powder and nothing more". His early military career was undistinguished. His family had sufficient wealth to take advantage of the purchase system, buying promotion, hopping from regiment to regiment. From an ensign in the 73rd Highlanders in 1787, he transferred to the 76th Foot with the higher rank of lieutenant a few months later. When this regiment was posted to the East Indies, Wellington slipped sideways to the 41st Foot. As a well-connected officer, he benefited from patronage as his family pulled strings. He served, for example, as aide de camp to Lord Buckingham, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, at double the pay of an ensign, and as MP for the family seat of Trim. As one historian commented, "in little more than five years he had held commissions in six different regiments, though there is no evidence that he served with any of them".

The turning point came in 1793. His request for the hand of Kitty Pakenham was turned down and the blow seems to have determined him to take soldiering seriously. That year saw the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France, and Lieutenant-Colonel Wesley (as he spelled his name then) took his regiment, the 33rd Foot, to war. It was the first step on a journey that would bring him a dukedom, a field marshal's baton and a place in the pantheon of history's greatest soldiers.

ment [for example saying a drawdown of troops from Iraq was necessary in order to allow the Army to focus on Afghanistan]. It is nothing new for a general to become involved in politics. Senior officers do not generally get to the top if they lack political talent, and there are numerous examples in British history of generals who possessed political skills. Field-Marshal Brooke, Churchill's senior military advisor during the Second World War, is an obvious example.

This is the actuality; but rhetoric has been somewhat different, and the myth has grown up that British generals are apolitical. In 1837 Wellington argued that "it was a principle of the government of this country" that the responsibility for the Army should be divided between military and civilian authorities and that 'political' matters such as payment of troops came under civil jurisdiction. Such a system of 'dual control' had a civilian secretary at war answerable to parliament, and a military commander-in-chief responsible to the Crown.

In reality, Wellington himself combined military and political careers, and he understood clearly the truth expressed by his contemporary, the Prussian soldier and military theorist Karl von Clausewitz, that "war is the continuation of politics by other means". War is an inherently political activity, and high commanders must understand and engage in the political process.

This is as true in times of ostensible peace as it is during major conflicts. Generals, admirals and air marshals deal with politicians, civil servants, other parts of security forces, and representatives of allied forces and governments; they attempt to influence strategic decision-making; fight for their share of budgets; and pursue their own career-enhancing agendas. On occasions, in the absence of civil authority, they exercise real power over ordinary people. All militaries by their very nature are political organisations, but unlike those of some other states, senior British commanders have generally kept political activity to the exercise of influence, recognising that there is a line that should not be crossed.

Arthur Wellesley (who will be called Wellington for convenience, although he was not created Viscount Wellington until 1809; he subsequently moved up the aristocratic pecking order by stages until he was created Duke in 1814) was a member of an intensely political family.

His elder brother, Richard, later First Marquess Wellesley, served as governor general of India from 1797 to 1805, where he forged a formidable, although not always



In India, Wellington learned his trade as a commander, including at Assaye in 1803 (shown here). By 1805, he was a highly experienced general, with both political and military skills.



harmonious, partnership with Wellington and another brother, Henry, later Lord Cowley, an able diplomat. Henry served as ambassador to Spain from 1809, succeeding Richard in this post. The latter went on to serve as foreign secretary from 1809 to 1812. Thus during the entire period of his command in Spain, Wellington had the support of one or more of his brothers in critical political positions.

Wellington was no stranger to politics. He served as a member of the Irish House of Commons in the 1790s and, after his return from India, as an MP at Westminster. In 1807 he became chief secretary for Ireland, a post in which he achieved some modest success. Thus on the eve of the Peninsular War (which pitted Britain and its allies against Napoleon's French empire in the Iberian peninsula), he was an experienced politician as well as a soldier. His political pedigree was a two-edged sword. His political apprenticeship was to stand him in good stead in the forthcoming campaigns, but the Wellesley clan had not achieved political eminence without making enemies.

Wellington's apprenticeship as a high commander took place in India. As well as

learning the trade of generalship in conventional campaigning, and anti-guerrilla operations against bandit forces, he also honed his political skills, whether as governor of Seringapatam, as a contributor (with his brother Richard) to British grand strategy in India, or as a diplomat.

Wellington's experiences in India taught him, or perhaps reinforced, some vital lessons. He learned the importance of good intelligence to operations, paying careful attention to the information brought to him by Indian spies. A mastery of logistics – the art of moving and supplying military forces – became the hallmark of Wellington's campaigns, and the humble bullock cart played a major role in his calculations, as it was to do in his later operations during the Peninsular War. "The success of military operations [in India]", he wrote, "depends upon supplies... to gain your object you must feed".

All of these facets of Wellington's way of war were underpinned by his understanding of the importance of the political dimension. He recognised the need to avoid antagonising the local population, to ensure cooperation, or at least to prevent resentful peasants

**A mastery of logistics – the art of moving and supplying military forces – became the hallmark of Wellington's campaigns**

from carrying out guerrilla warfare. This was as true in Spain as in India. Similarly, operating alongside difficult Indian allies was good training for his dealings with the Spanish authorities a decade later.

### Tact tested to the utmost

Wellington recognised that the disciplines of coalition warfare demanded that allies be carefully handled. They provided troops – Wellington's initial command in 1799 consisted of 11 battalions, of which just one was British, six consisted of sepoys (Indian troops) provided by the East India Company, and four battalions belonged to the army of a friendly Indian ruler, the Nizam of Hyderabad. They also provided supplies, and the all important bullocks. When in 1804 the Governor General (his brother, Richard) refused to honour part of a treaty that Wellington had negotiated with Scindiah, a Maratha chief, he tartly wrote: "I would sacrifice Gwalior [Scindiah's capital]... ten times over, in order to preserve our credit, for scrupulous good faith... What brought me through many difficulties in the war, and the negotiations for peace? The British good faith and nothing else".

Napoleon sneered at Wellington as a 'sepoy general', the implication being that fighting in India was poor training for campaigning in Europe. In reality, Wellington's campaigns in India meant that he was exceptionally well prepared for his operations in the Iberian peninsula. This was, once again, coalition warfare. Wellington succeeded in wielding immense influence over the Portuguese government. A British general, William Beresford, was placed in command of the Portuguese army, which was reorganised, trained, and took its place in the line of battle alongside the British. Taxes went up, and Wellington imposed a scorched earth strategy during 1810–11 that in the words of one historian, "brought social and economic disaster" to the areas affected. Not surprisingly, Wellington, supported by his brother Richard, the Foreign Secretary, had to devote much attention to pacifying the Portuguese Council of Regency.

Wellington had less success with his Spanish allies. His tact and patience were taxed to the utmost by his experience of cooperating with the elderly and obstinate General Cuesta in the Talavera campaign of 1809. Although the faults were certainly not all on one side, the poor battlefield performance of the Spanish army exacerbated the difficult personal relationship between the two men. Above all, Wellington's view of the



Wellington had a long political career, becoming prime minister. Although he was conservative in most ways, in 1829 his government passed a reform allowing Catholics to have a seat in parliament

Spanish was soured by their failure to make good a previous promise that "every needful article should be forthcoming" to supply the British troops.

Although the battle of Talavera was a tactical victory, Wellington, short on supplies and disillusioned with his allies, withdrew his army to Portugal. But the need to cooperate with Spanish armies did not disappear. In 1812, after his victory at Salamanca and his subsequent occupation of Madrid, Wellington was appointed as commander-in-chief of the Spanish Army.

This act represented both recognition of the importance of the unity of command and the Spanish hope that this would force Wellington to answer to the Cortes (Spain's parliament). Wellington's new position was not a great success. He was at loggerheads with the "violent and democratical princi-

ples" of the liberal dominated Cortes, while the Cortes had a healthy dislike and suspicion of this aloof and demanding foreign general. For all that, both sides made the relationship work – just. Although Wellington had friends (and relatives) in high places at home, that did not mean that he lacked political worries. After Talavera, Earl Grey attacked Wellington's "want of capacity and want of skill". In 1811, when King George III lost his mind, it was widely but in the event erroneously believed that the Prince Regent would appoint Grey at the head of a Whig ministry. This would almost certainly have meant the end of the British campaign in Portugal.

### Playing the political game

As it was, Wellington frequently complained about the lack of support from the government. After the bloody capture of the fortress of Badajoz in 1812, he pointed out that the "great losses could have been avoided" if "a properly trained" body of siege specialists had been at his disposal. Yet he was careful to retain a working relationship with his political masters.

In spite of all his problems, between 1808 and 1814 Wellington waged a series of campaigns that cemented his claim to be one of the greatest generals in history. He had a combination of talents that set him apart. He was a brilliant tactician and strategist; had an excellent grasp of logistics and intelligence; and possessed both ruthlessness and luck.

Underpinning his achievements as a military commander were his political abilities, which served him well in his dealings with his superiors, with his allies, and gave him a healthy sense of the art of the possible.

Some senior soldiers play the political game because their job demands it. Wellington was different. The politician was never far below the surface of the soldier.

It should have come as a surprise to no one that when his active military career ended, he returned to national politics. As master general of the Ordnance (a military position with a seat in the Cabinet), commander-in-chief of the Army, prime minister between 1828 and 1830, and Tory elder statesman, Wellington played a central role in British politics for over 30 years. In spite of his protestations to the contrary, the Duke of Wellington was the very model of a political general. **H**

**Wellington was a brilliant tactician and strategist; had an excellent grasp of logistics and intelligence; and possessed both ruthlessness and luck**

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# EMPEROR IN EXILE

He'd already escaped one island internment, but this time Napoleon's banishment was permanent. All at sea in the Atlantic, the fallen French ruler's final years were a battle of a different kind, writes **Julian Humphrys**

St Helena was a different prospect to Elbe – where, before he had the run of the island, here Napoleon was watched at all times.



**T**he isle of St Helena, 4,500 miles from England and 1,200 miles from West Africa, was once described as being the place "further away from any-

where else in all the world". So when, in 1815, the British government was looking for somewhere secure to house Napoleon Bonaparte – who not long before had abdicated as Emperor of France and surrendered to them – St Helena seemed the ideal place.

This was the second time that Napoleon had abdicated. He did so for the first on 6 April 1814; Paris had fallen to the European coalition formed against him, the Duke of Wellington had crossed the Pyrenees and invaded the south of France, and Napoleon's marshals were no longer prepared to fight on.

The defeated emperor had been treated relatively generously by the victorious allies. They sent him to rule the Mediterranean island of Elba, six miles off the coast of Tuscany, and they even allowed him to take a tiny army with him, chiefly drawn from his Imperial Guard. Energetic as ever, Napoleon busied himself with a series of improvements to the island's infrastructure, but he always kept a close eye on European affairs. Aware of the growing unpopularity of the restored French monarchy, he soon decided to take a gamble.

### Welcomed back to France

Slipping away from Elba with a small force, he landed in France near Antibes on 1 March 1815. As he headed north, the troops sent to intercept him came over to his side in droves and – on 20 March – he was back in the Tuileries Palace in Paris, which had been hastily abandoned by Louis XVIII.

The nations of Europe began mobilising once more, but Napoleon struck first, attacking an allied army under Wellington and a Prussian army under Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher in what is now Belgium. Napoleon initially caught his enemies on the hop, but on 18 June he was crushingly defeated at Waterloo. Four days after that, he abdicated for a second time.

Napoleon's immediate plan was to try and escape to America. He made for Rochefort on the west coast of France, where he hoped a frigate would transport him across the Atlantic. But there was a major flaw – the port was blockaded by the Royal Navy in the form of the 74-gun HMS *Bellerophon*, a veteran of Britain's wars against the French.

Napoleon's life was now genuinely in danger: there was little doubt that both



The French monarchy sent troops to arrest Napoleon after his escape from Elba, instead, they welcomed him

the restored French monarchy and the Prussians would have executed him had he fallen into their hands. Eventually, he and his advisors realised that the only option was to surrender to the British, whom Napoleon described in a letter to the future George IV, then Prince Regent, as "the most powerful, the most constant and the most generous" of his enemies.

On the morning of Saturday 15 July, Napoleon boarded the *Bellerophon* and surrendered to its captain, Frederick Maitland. As the ship set off for England, the British government had already decided what to do with their exalted prisoner. Napoleon clearly hoped that he would be given an estate in Britain on which he could live out his days. Indeed, that's what he claimed he'd been promised by Maitland – a claim vigorously denied by the captain himself.

But there was little chance that the British government would allow such a dangerous

figure to live in their midst. They needed somewhere secure – and a very long way away. And in the remote Atlantic island of St Helena, they had the very place. The prime minister, Lord Liverpool, wrote that it was "the place in the world best calculated for the confinement of such a person", adding that "there is only one place... where ships can anchor, and we have the power of excluding neutral ships altogether". He goes on to say that "at such a place and such a distance all intrigue would be impossible; and, being so far from the European world, [Napoleon] would soon be forgotten". How wrong he was about the last bit.

On 24 July, the *Bellerophon* anchored off Torbay, Devon. The news that Napoleon was on board leaked out, and soon the old warship was surrounded by hundreds of small craft, all packed with passengers desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of the fallen emperor.

A similar scene was played out two days later when she anchored off Plymouth, and it was there that a furious Napoleon learned of his final destination. On 7 August, Napoleon and 26 companions boarded the HMS *Northumberland* as the long voyage south began. More had wanted to go with him, but the British were wary of creating a Napoleonic colony on the island and so restricted the number.

It wasn't until 14 October that the black, volcanic cliffs of St Helena came into view. Predictably, Napoleon was far from impressed, remarking that he would have been better off if he had stayed in Egypt. Three days later, he disembarked with his entourage at Jamestown, the island's main settlement. Longwood House, the residence set aside for him, wasn't ready, and so while the *Northumberland's* carpenters busied themselves repairing it, Napoleon spent seven weeks in The Briars, a bungalow near to Jamestown that was the residence of William Balcombe, an official of the East India Company. While he was there he struck up an avuncular friendship with Balcombe's 14-year-old daughter, Betsy.

### Longwood Christmas

On 10 December 1815, he finally moved into Longwood, the house that, despite his vehement protests, would be his home for the rest of his life. Longwood was a large, rambling single-storey building set among lava fields on a high plateau, near the stunted trees of the rather ominously named Deadwood Plain.

Although it hardly compared with the palaces of Europe, Longwood was spacious by St Helena standards: it had room for

**Napoleon clearly hoped that he would be given an estate in Britain on which he could live out his days. Indeed, that's what he claimed he'd been promised**



Napoleon's generals look on in consternation as he prepares to surrender to Britain, hoping for political asylum there



The presence of the former emperor caused a stir when *Beilerophon* reached England



## THE 'FOUR APOSTLES' NAPOLEON'S CLOSEST COMPANIONS IN EXILE

### Henri-Gatien Bertrand

A talented general and loyal servant of Napoleon. His wife became hysterical and tried to jump overboard when she heard that she and her husband were accompanying the fallen emperor to St Helena. He stayed with Napoleon until his death and was a member of the expedition sent to recover his remains in 1840.



### Charles-Tristan de Montholon

A general and diplomat. His wife Albine is reputed to have been Napoleon's mistress on St Helena. Although she would leave the island in 1818, Montholon stayed with Napoleon at Longwood until his death.



### Emmanuel, Count de Las Cases

A former royalist who became a chamberlain of Napoleon. He took copious notes of his conversations and later published them as *The Memorial of St Helena*. He was expelled from the island in November 1816 when it was discovered he was smuggling secret correspondence.



### Gaspard Gourgaud

This soldier who fought in many of Napoleon's battles saved his life at Brénne, in France, in 1814. Despite insisting on accompanying Napoleon to St Helena, his hot-headed nature led to friction with the other companions and, in 1818, he was permitted to leave the island.



Napoleon hated Longwood House. He died there in his bed, shown above, in 1821.

Napoleon's entourage as well as a billiard room, salon, library and dining room. On the other hand, its lofty location meant that it missed out on the pleasant climate enjoyed by the inhabitants down at Jamestown. It was windswept, regularly swathed in clouds and full of damp.

While this made for rather unpleasant living conditions, Napoleon saw an opportunity to get off the island by claiming that its unhealthy climate was ruining his health. His argument was backed up by his doctor, Barry O'Meara, who had completely fallen for his patient's famous charm and remained a devotee of the ex-emperor until his death. Meanwhile, his adherents bombarded Europe with letters and pamphlets complaining of unhealthy conditions, unnecessary restrictions, insults and poor provisions – and laid the blame squarely on the new governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, who had arrived on the island in April 1816.

Lowe's first meeting with Napoleon went badly, and things didn't get any better. Even though they lived just three miles apart they only met six times in the first four months that Lowe was on St Helena, and then never saw each other again. Lowe has been described as a tactless martinet, but in these stormy meetings he retained his self-control even when Napoleon accused him of being a clerk and not a soldier.

Napoleon's comment was not only provocative, it was inaccurate. Lowe had campaigned all around the Mediterranean – much of it in command of a unit formed from anti-French Corsicans. He had been the senior British officer present at the battle of Leipzig in 1813 and was the first officer to bring Britain news of Napoleon's abdication in 1814. General Sir John Moore thought highly of him, saying when "Lowe's at the outposts I'm sure of a good night". Wellington was less impressed, calling him "a damned old fool".

**As time went on, loneliness and boredom began to take its toll. Napoleon became increasingly lethargic and depressed**

As a soldier, Lowe seems to have been diligent and reliable rather than brilliant and imaginative, but that was exactly what was required for this job. In any case, what other senior officer would have taken the position? As Lord Bathurst wrote to the Duke of Wellington, he did not believe that they "could have found a fitter person of his rank in the army willing to accept a situation of so much confinement, responsibility and exclusion from society".

### Life under a lens

Napoleon's life on St Helena was governed by a mass of restrictive regulations, all enforced by Lowe. He was denied newspapers, subjected to a curfew, watched all the time and heavily guarded, with 125 men stationed around Longwood in the day and 72 at night. He was, in effect, under house arrest.

Lowe is frequently seen as the architect of these regulations, but in fact he was merely carrying out specific instructions sent to him from London. Napoleon had escaped from an island before, and the British weren't taking any chances. Lowe had been sent to do a job and he followed his instructions to the letter.



During his first couple of years on St Helena, Napoleon took regular walks, went riding and spent much of his time reminiscing and dictating his memoirs to his companions. But as time went on, and the months turned into years, loneliness and boredom began to take its toll. Napoleon became increasingly lethargic and depressed, spending long hours sitting alone or lying on his bed. By 1820, it was clear that he was seriously ill. He suffered from abdominal pains, nausea, fevers, constipation and diarrhoea; his gums, lips and nails were colourless. For a while, he thought he was being poisoned, but then decided that he'd the same cancer that had killed his father. But there was still time for one last swipe at the British, and at Lowe in particular.

Dictating his last will and testament in April 1821, he added, "My death is premature. I have been assassinated by the English oligopoly and their hired murderer." Although some conspiracy theorists have taken these words literally, Napoleon was probably implying that the authorities' refusal to agree to his demands to be moved from the unhealthy Longwood had hastened his death. On 4 May, he lost consciousness, the following day, surrounded by his companions, he died.

Napoleon had requested in his will that his remains should be laid to rest "by the banks of the Seine, surrounded by the French people, whom I love so dearly". But at that time, there was little chance that either the restored Bourbon monarchy or the British authorities would allow the creation of what might well become a shrine to their old enemy in Paris. Napoleon would be buried on St Helena.

The whole population turned out to watch as 12 British grenadiers carried Napoleon's velvet-covered coffin for burial in the tranquil Geranium Valley. There, dressed in his favourite uniform of a colonel of the Chasseurs à Cheval, Napoleon's body was laid to rest. Even then there was one last battle to be fought. And it was all over a surname.

The French wanted simply to inscribe 'Napoleon', his name as emperor, on the tomb. But the British, who were reluctant to give his empire any sense of legitimacy, insisted on his full name – Napoleon Bonaparte. Neither side would give ground and in the end, until relocation to France in 1840, the remains of the most famous man in Europe would spend nearly 20 years in an unmarked grave. **II**

Julian Humphrys worked at the National Army Museum and is development officer for the Battlefields Trust



ABOVE: Napoleon wasn't the only British foe exiled to St Helena.

In later years it welcomed Boer War prisoners including commander Piet Cronje. RIGHT: Longwood was not a happy place for Napoleon – he complained that it was damp and cold.



## MURDER ON ST HELENA?

Rumours he had been poisoned followed Napoleon's death

Was Napoleon murdered in 1821? The doctors who attended his autopsy certainly didn't think so. As far as they were concerned, Napoleon had died of stomach cancer.

However, rumours Napoleon might have been a target for something more sinister had been around for years – since 1818, when Barry O'Meara, the Royal Navy surgeon who had been Napoleon's doctor, insinuated that Sir Hudson Lowe had once asked him to shorten Napoleon's life. The British authorities took a dim view of O'Meara's claims and he was dismissed, but the idea that Napoleon could have been murdered lingered.

Eventually, in the 1960s, an analysis of a lock of Napoleon's hair proved that he had high levels of arsenic in his system, leading some to argue that Napoleon had been poisoned, probably by the British government. But others, while agreeing

that arsenic might have killed Napoleon, argued that it was more likely to have been accidental. An analysis of the wallpaper from Longwood did indeed show that it contained an arsenic-based dye that mould transformed into poisonous fumes. Later researchers tested hairs from some of Napoleon's contemporaries and concluded that by modern standards they all had abnormally high levels of arsenic, for at the time it was widely used in paint, tapestry, medicine and even the preservation of food.

The final blow to the arsenic murder theory was struck by a team of Italian scientists in 2008, who analysed hairs taken from Napoleon's head at various times in his life and preserved in museums (including when he was a boy). They discovered that the arsenic levels were the same in all of them. The doctors had almost certainly been right all along.

The court of Ottoman sultan Selim III, whose vast empire included Egypt when it was invaded by Napoleon in 1798. The incident was particularly alarming for the British, since it directly threatened access to their own empire in India



# A clash of empires





Although the opposing sides were European, their status as imperial powers meant the Napoleonic Wars played out in many different corners of the world.

**Michael Rapport** explores the conflict's surprising global impact

**T**he Napoleonic Wars were a global conflict that in some ways anticipated the world wars of the 20th century, while still being rooted in the imperial battles of the 18th.

To a great extent, they were a classic clash of early modern empires. Although Europe witnessed the bloodiest of the carnage, the involvement of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal – all maritime and imperial powers – ensured that fighting would range across the globe. The European dimensions of the war, whether on the continent itself or overseas, have of course received ample attention from historians, but more genuinely global approaches have begun to explore how these struggles were entangled with the wider environment and context of the global regions concerned.

So Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 interlocked with the politics and culture of the Middle East and the Ottoman empire. When the Franco-British rivalry in India ignited, the conflict was shaped by the relative strengths, weaknesses and aims of the Indian powers involved. The Latin American wars of independence, which began in 1810 and were triggered by the Napoleonic Wars, were primarily shaped by local conditions. The fighting in North America during the War of 1812 may have helped to entrench American and Canadian identities, but they also involved Native Americans, whose motives were very different from those of the Europeans.

The European war, in other words, was globalised because it became intertwined with longer-term rivalries and conflicts across the world – the consequences of which are explored on the next few pages.

## THE MIDDLE EAST

# Napoleonic-era power politics extended to Egypt and beyond

"May God cause the upheaval in France to spread like syphilis to the enemies of the empire Amen" So wrote Ahmed Efendi, secretary to Selim III, the Ottoman sultan, in January 1792. His prayer was answered as the French Revolutionary Wars raged across most of Europe, leaving Turkey in peace.

This changed in July 1798, when a French army under Napoleon invaded Egypt, then part of the Ottoman empire, mauled the famous Mamluk cavalry at the battle of the Pyramids and took Cairo. The attack brought Turkey into the wars against Revolutionary France. Henceforth Middle Eastern politics were never entirely absent from the global strategies of the European belligerents.

Napoleon's army was cut off from Europe when Nelson's fleet shattered its French opponents at Aboukir Bay, off the coast of Egypt, in August. In February 1799, Napoleon sought to fight his way back to Europe and forestall a Turkish counter-attack by invading Palestine and Syria. His advance ground to a bloody halt at Acre, which held out, supported by Turkish and British naval forces. Exhausted and ravaged by plague, the French trailed back into Egypt. Napoleon slipped ignominiously out of the country that August and seized power in France with his Brumaire coup in November. His deserted army clung on until a Turkish-British expedition (aided in part by Indian troops) retook Cairo in June 1801.

The French invasion proved particularly alarming to the British since it directly threatened their own empire in India. Henceforth the Ottoman empire would be entangled in the Napoleonic Wars, as the imperial rivals – France, Britain, Russia and Austria – sought to assert their strategic interests. When Selim III yielded to French pressure in 1806

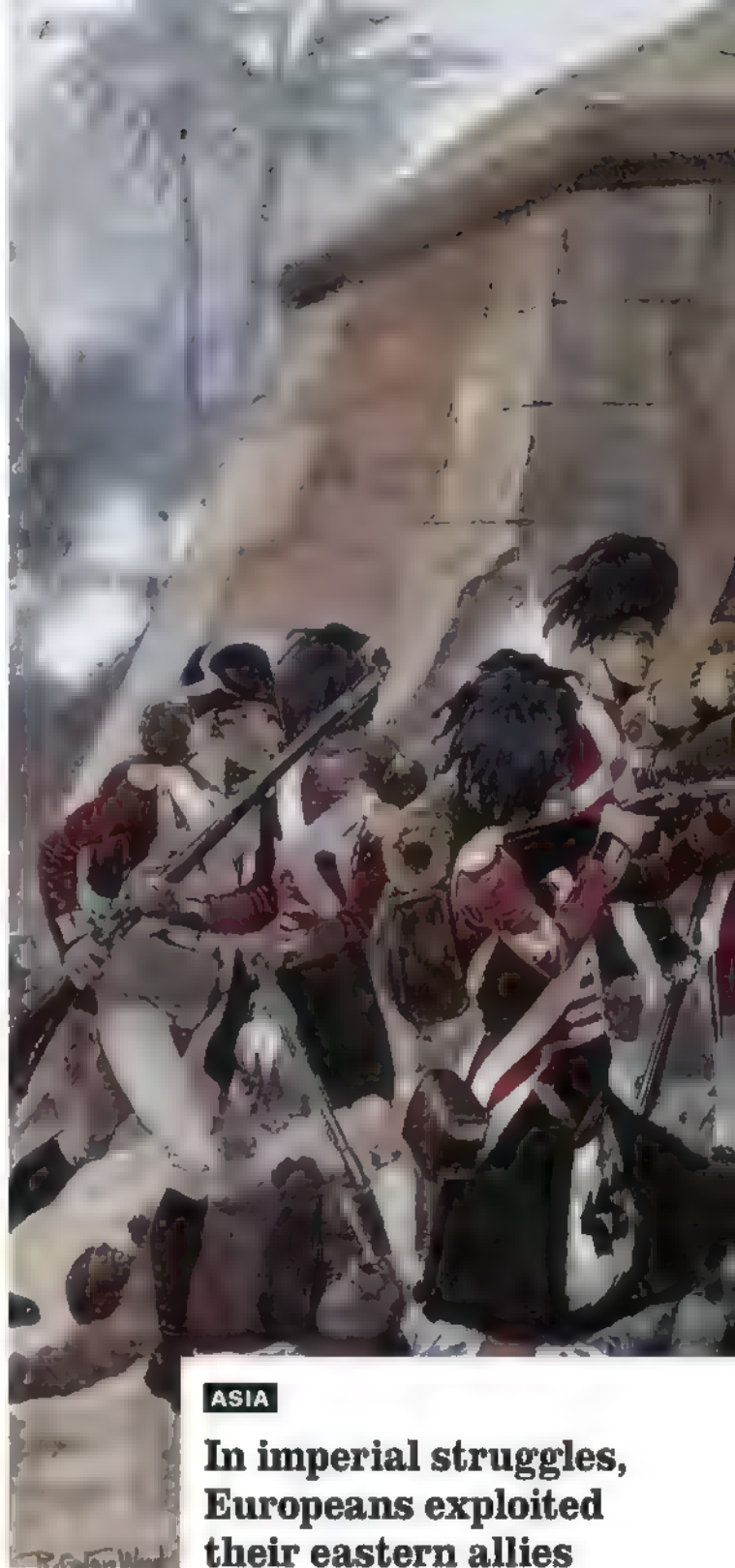
to favour French naval access to the Black Sea, the British launched attacks on the Turks in both the Dardanelles and Egypt – and were defeated.

At the same time, the Russians sought to expand at Turkish expense and invaded through both the Balkans and the Caucasus in a war that would last until Tsar Alexander I, facing the prospect of Napoleon's invasion of his own country, negotiated a peace in May 1812. Turkey's neighbour, the Persian empire, was a diplomatic battleground between the Russians, French and British, as the three European powers vied to project their strategic interests – the Russians to expand their empire southwards, the French to threaten the other two and the British to ensure the security of India.

Yet the importance of the Middle East was also cultural. When he invaded Egypt, Napoleon brought with him a team of scholars who, among other things, laid the foundations for modern Egyptology. The Rosetta Stone, enabling the deciphering of hieroglyphics, was discovered and the academics produced a series of publications that became famous as the *Description of Egypt*, documenting all aspects of Egypt, past and present.

Yet in comparing Egypt's past glories with its allegedly impoverished present, it made the Middle East seem not only different from the West but backwards, which in turn would provide a justification for European imperialism.

Sultan Selim III was pressured by the French to allow favoured naval access to the Black Sea.



## ASIA

# In imperial struggles, Europeans exploited their eastern allies

Fighting in the Napoleonic Wars spilled over into Asia as imperial frictions between the European belligerents exploded.

The most important battleground was India, where the long Franco-British struggle was intermeshed with the crisis of the Mughal empire, which had been steadily unravelling since the late 17th century, and with rivalries between Indian states, the most powerful of which were the Hindu Maratha confederacy, Hyderabad and Mysore.

The British East India Company held sway over territories that included Bengal (where the governor general sat in Kolkata), Mumbai, and Chennai, and with its own armed forces and its





An illustration depicts British and Indian troops storming the fort at Srirangapatna, which resulted in the death of Tipu of Mysore, a French ally

tax-raising powers, was virtually a state in its own right. The French, though defeated heavily in India during the Seven Years' War (1756–63), still had viable and potentially rich footholds in its five main comptoirs (trading posts), chief of which was Pondichéry (now Puducherry).

Both European powers relied heavily on Indian allies, engaging in a system of 'subsidiary treaties', by which Indian rulers secured military support in return for payments of money or territory. In this way, British military and political presence gradually expanded in South Asia, but the Napoleonic Wars also provided opportunities for full-frontal conquest.

The French invasion of Egypt in 1798 seemed to pose a direct threat to India, not least because Tipu, ruler of the militarily powerful southern kingdom of Mysore, had entered into an alliance with the French. In May 1799, an army of British and Indian troops stormed the citadel at Srirangapatna, killing Tipu, the 'Tiger of Mysore', and effectively annexing the kingdom.

Next came the Marathas in central India. A small French presence provided an excuse, but the real reason was the formidable power that the confederacy presented. In the Anglo-Maratha War of 1803–05, Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, won his bloodiest battle before Waterloo at Assaye (1803), but a British advance against the Maratha prince Holkar proved disastrous by July 1804. A bloody siege of the formidable fortress of Bharatpur was repulsed in February 1805. These defeats compelled the Company to reach a peace with the Marathas, who would not bend to British domination until defeated in 1817–18.

The British did, however, secure the intercontinental shipping route between Britain and Asia. In January 1806, they managed to wrest control of the Cape Colony in southern Africa from the Dutch, who were allied to the French. In 1810 they took, first, the Île Bourbon (now Réunion) and then Mauritius, partly to expel French privateers who raided British shipping on the Indian Ocean. In 1811, the British also

began seizing the lucrative Dutch-controlled spice islands of Indonesia, including Java.

Yet the Asian capacity to resist European incursions was still vigorous. In 1793, Chinese emperor Qianlong rebuffed a British mission seeking privileged commercial relations. In 1805, the Japanese Shogunate dismissed a Russian attempt by Nikolai Rezanov to prise their country open to the Tsar's trade. It would take the shock of new, industrialised military technology for European and Asian capabilities to diverge dramatically, and before the former would foist themselves decisively on the latter.

**In India the Franco-British struggle intermeshed with the crisis of the Mughal empire**



### NORTH AMERICA

## The clash of European powers inflamed conflict in the US

In 1814 the treaty of Ghent ended the war between Britain and the US. Tensions that were created after France sold Louisiana to the US in 1803 had contributed to the outbreak of war in 1812.

On 3 December 1805, William Clark carved his name and 'By Land from the U States in 1804 & 1805' into a tree on America's Pacific coast. With Meriwether Lewis, Clark had led an American expedition, commissioned by President Jefferson and setting off in May 1804, to explore the regions west of the Mississippi acquired by the US from France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

France had originally acquired this vast, funnel-shaped territory (extending from the Mississippi Delta to Canada, and at its broadest, to the western border of Montana) as the result of its alliance with Spain. Napoleon's original plan had been to exploit the region in order to supply France's Caribbean slave plantations with food and raw materials.

Yet the jewel of the French empire, Saint Domingue, had erupted into insurrection in 1791, when its enslaved Africans rose up, inspired by a combination of resistance to oppression, their Vodou religion, and among leaders such as Toussaint Louverture – the French Revolution. France abolished slavery in 1794,

Napoleon restored it in 1802 and the insurgents of Saint-Domingue, renaming their country Haiti, resisted and defeated a French force that had been sent to repress it.

By 1803, it was clear France was on the cusp of losing its richest colony and so Louisiana lost its primary purpose. Napoleon also desperately needed funds for a planned invasion of Britain. So the American negotiators sent to Paris to secure free commercial access through New Orleans were surprised to be greeted with an offer of the entire territory for the knock-down price of 3 cents an acre. The deal was announced in July 1803.

This westward leap by the US was not universally welcomed: the northern 'free' states worried that slavery would spread into the new territory. The Purchase also increased border tensions with the British in Canada and war eventually exploded in 1812, over the US-Canadian frontier and over British pressing of American sailors into the Royal Navy.

Initial American attacks on Canada in Autumn 1812 ended in failure and the British exploited their naval

supremacy by blockading American ports and mounting coastal raids, including an assault on Washington where government buildings (most famously the White House) were burned in August 1814.

The conflict ended with negotiations in Ghent and a treaty signed on Christmas Eve, 1814. News of the peace reached America too late to stop a battle at New Orleans on 8 January 1815, when the Americans under Andrew Jackson repulsed a British assault on the city.

One legacy of the War of 1812 was that it crystallised both American and Canadian identities, but it was a tragedy for the Native Americans. Since 1808, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh had forged a tribal confederation to defend Native American independence. He helped the British take Detroit in August 1812, but when the Americans swept the Royal Navy from Lake Erie in September 1813, it became harder for Tecumseh to protect tribal lands and he was killed in battle in October 1813. The Native American alliance fell apart, losing its lands to the Americans.



**By 1825, most of Spain's American colonies were independent republics that would soon abolish slavery and end the colonial caste system**

Venezuelan military leader Simón Bolívar liberated much of Latin America from Spanish rule



## SOUTH AMERICA

### War in Europe triggered a crisis in the Spanish and Portuguese empires

The most striking global consequence of the Napoleonic Wars was the independence of South America. Most of the continent had been part of the Spanish empire, with Brazil ruled by the Portuguese.

The European war triggered, but did not cause, the Latin American wars of independence. These flowed from longer-term efforts by the Spanish monarchy to strengthen its grip on its colonies (provoking a backlash among creole elites) and from discontent among the colonies' merchants chafing against the Spanish monopoly of trade. On top of this, a rebellion in what is now Peru in 1780–83 (led by Túpac Amaru until 1781) against Spanish reforms, taxation and the repression of indigenous and mixed-race (mestizo) people had also shaken Spanish rule to the core.

The wars were sparked when Napoleon seized the Spanish King Fernando VII and the royal family in 1808 and tried to take over Spain. The Spanish resistance to French rule created a Cortes, a parliament meeting in Cádiz, which passed a liberal constitution in 1812, declaring free men in any Spanish-ruled domain to be citizens – so in the colonies this included creole, mixed-race and native men, but not women or slaves. This attempt to create a liberal, imperial monarchy came too late to stop the first stirrings for independence.

In Latin America royal officials were squeezed out by creole elites who, as in Spain, formed committees or juntas, initially to defend the colonies against the French. Yet while the Latin American colonies sent delegates to the Cortes and helped shape the Spanish constitution, these provincial committees frequently clashed with the central junta in Spain. In the process, they also began fitfully to shape claims for independence.

The first declarations of independence came in 1810 and positions hardened when, in 1814 at the end of the Peninsular War, King Fernando VII was restored to the Spanish throne and repudiated the 1812 Constitution. This restoration of the absolute monarchy accelerated the imperial crisis as, one by one, Latin American states declared and fought for independence in bitter wars. Perhaps most notably, the victory of Venezuela's Simón Bolívar (pictured left) at the battle of Boyacá in 1819 led to the creation of Gran Colombia, a state encompassing much of northern South America and part of Central America.

By 1825, many of Spain's American colonies, from Chile to Mexico, were independent republics that would soon abolish slavery and end the colonial caste system based on race.

Portuguese-ruled Brazil also followed a path partially conditioned by events in Napoleonic Europe. When the French invaded Portugal in 1807, the British evacuated the royal family to Brazil. Rio de Janeiro became the functioning capital of the Portuguese empire under King Juan VI. At the end of the war, Juan stayed in Brazil, while his son, Pedro, became Portuguese regent; the two countries were declared to be a union of equals in 1815.

A liberal revolution in Portugal in 1820 demanded Juan's return to Lisbon, sent Pedro back to Brazil and in 1821 sought to reimpose Portuguese sovereignty over the colony. A Brazilian uprising ensued and led Pedro to declare independence in 1822, culminating in Portuguese recognition in 1825. **W**

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In 1812 Spain's liberal constitution was announced. It coincided with a move for independence in South America

# Redrawing

A cartoon from 1815 entitled *The Cake of Kings*, mocking the talks at the Congress of Vienna and the negotiations over 'slices' of Europe after the fall of Napoleon's empire





# the map



After Napoleon's defeat came the haggling over Europe's future.

## David Andress

reveals how diplomatic talks in Vienna ushered in a new authoritarian order that would change the continent forever

**T**he emperor Napoleon chillingly denounced appeals to avoid renewed general war in late June 1813 with the words: "A man like me troubles himself little about the lives of a million men!" At least, that is, according to his interlocutor, Klemens von Metternich. The wily head of Austrian diplomacy, granted a private meeting with Napoleon in the Marcolini Palace in Dresden, offered this account of the emperor's scorn in partial explanation of what was to happen next.

As late as the summer of 1813, it was not clear that the whole of Europe would unite against Napoleon. He might have lost more than half a million men in the 1812 invasion of Russia, but his bureaucrats and policemen had dredged up almost as many again from every corner of his empire, and they held firm in central Europe, far away from France.

English gold, which Napoleon continually cursed, might be sustaining a campaign in Spain and subsidising Russia and a newly-belligerent Prussia, but Austria remained at least nominally an ally, and the emperor maintained the hope of bullying its ruler Francis, his father-in-law, into continued submission. Austrian diplomacy, meanwhile, driven by Metternich, secured a truce between France and the Russo-Prussian forces that lasted from early June until 10 August, and could have resulted, had the parties been willing, in a general peace.

That it did not, and that within two years Napoleon had been driven into exile twice, leaving France subjected to military occupation, and paving the way for a generation-long conservative clampdown across the continent, was largely due to the character of the emperor himself. Napoleon in 1813 was a ruthless autocrat, so sure of his own superiority that he sent a proxy without a mandate to fill a chair at Metternich's peace-negotiations, and used the truce period to build up



A scene at the Congress, when Vienna became a political and cultural hub with splendid social events alongside the talks

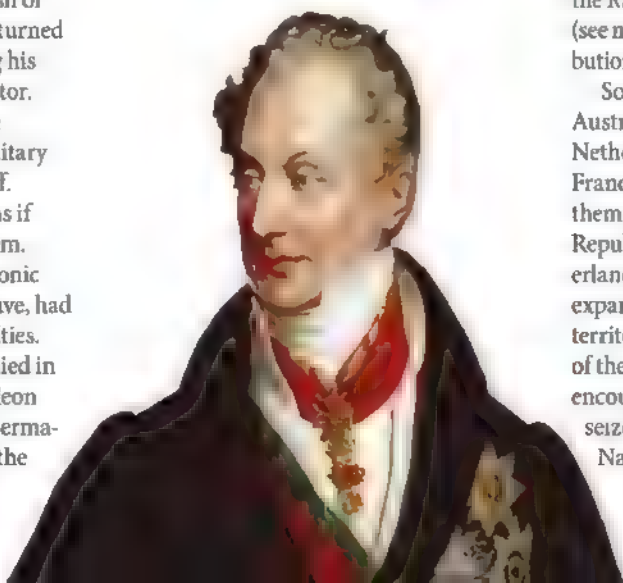
his forces for renewed attacks. When fighting resumed, it all went devastatingly wrong, as the bullied Austrians threw in their lot against him. At the 'battle of Nations' in Leipzig in October, many thousands of men died to force a long, slow retreat upon the French. Most of the emperor's new army was consumed, more by epidemic sickness than in battle.

In the early months of 1814, Napoleon still believed, as he had the year before, that all that mattered was a trial of strength, and he could somehow snatch victory. But his own forces were ragged remnants of glory, and his own marshals turned against him. The immediate outcome, Napoleon's exile to Elba, was a deal between Russia's Tsar Alexander and the turncoat French diplomat Talleyrand, leaving the defeated ruler far too close to the centre of Europe for British or Austrian tastes. Their concerns were turned aside; Alexander insisting on keeping his word as a self-defined chivalric liberator. Vengeful Prussian claims for massive compensation for years of French military occupation were similarly brushed off.

In the summer of 1814, it seemed as if France was no longer Europe's problem. Under its restored monarchy, Napoleonic marshals, even Ney, bravest of the brave, had rediscovered ancestral Bourbon loyalties. The officer-class of the continent partied in Paris, enjoying the artistic loot Napoleon had collected from Spain, Italy and Germany, with cries for its return muted by the

### Vienna's public buildings were filled for months with intricate rounds of haggling between the powers

The Congress was chaired and carefully orchestrated by the Austrian statesman Metternich



dazzling spectacle of it all in one place. It was elsewhere that tensions were rising.

The European powers had been imagining the defeat of Napoleon for a decade. But they had never agreed on what that should mean. Britain and Russia had, for example, discussed positions in 1805 that would have left Austria and Prussia weakened and marginalised in Germany. The fate of populations in northern Italy and Poland, who had been partitioned assorted ways, in some cases several times, in the past 20 years, preoccupied both idealists, and those who cared only for power. The idea of Germany had been transformed by the destruction at Napoleon's hands of the Holy Roman Empire and its hundreds of micro-territories and privileged lordships. Now the satellite-states that the emperor had grouped into the *Rheimbund* or Confederation of the Rhine (see map on page 6) was available for redistribution and reconstitution.

Some things had already been settled. Austria had signed away any claim on its Netherlands (modern-day Belgium) that France had occupied for 20 years, pushing them instead, with the former Dutch Republic, into a new Kingdom of the Netherlands to resist future French northward expansion. In return, Austria gained back territories in northern Italy, including those of the old Venetian Republic that France had encouraged it to grab in the 1790s, only to seize them for itself after Austerlitz.

Napoleon's brother-in-law, Joachim



Murat, was left to enjoy his throne as King of Naples – in part, perhaps, because his wife, Napoleon's sister Caroline, had been Metternich's lover some years before.

The personal and the political were heavily entwined in this milieu. Tsar Alexander, despite the deep religious awakening he had experienced since Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, was also happy to accept the attentions of society hostesses – flattering or frankly amorous – as he progressed westward in the wake of his armies. Wellington, new-minted British ambassador to the court of Louis XVIII, cut a similar swathe through Paris (as Metternich had done years earlier in a similar role), and ruffled Bonapartist feathers by taking up with Giuseppina Grassini, a famed operatic singer, and anointed mistress of the emperor.

Unsurprisingly, the diplomatic resolution of Europe's many issues would take place in an atmosphere of fervid sexual intrigue.

### Sovereigns and spies

A congress at Vienna had been agreed in the spring of 1814, in the first flush of victory. Delegates began gathering in September. Metternich had taken special care to plan for their arrival. Hundreds of new informants were recruited among servants, tradesmen and innkeepers, some of whom were specially trained in removing and replacing confidential correspondence, copying keys and all the arts of covert surveillance.

Some among the higher echelons of society volunteered to inform, while even the postal service was turned to the purpose of temporarily purloining diplomatic correspondence when its couriers stopped to change horses. Meanwhile, simply providing the normal complement of domestic service for the crowned heads attending as guests of the sovereign required recruiting an extra 1,500 servants at state expense. It was a vast investment that Metternich was determined should not go to waste.

Vienna's public buildings were filled for months with intricate rounds of haggling between the powers, and petitioning from the lesser players. From the outset, deliberation was ferociously self-interested. Diplomats and ministers referred to the populations under discussion as 'souls', but treated them as so many thousands of taxable and conscriptable bodies to be bartered with. All the many legal titles and personal claims that members of the German nobility had over the extinction of the Holy Roman Empire were steamrollered by the determination of each power to secure advantage.

Russian ministers declared they would be keeping the whole of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, Napoleon's Polish puppet-state. But



Napoleon's empire was dismantled after his fall: here he pulls the French king, in a chair driven by Wellington

some of that territory had been Prussian after an earlier carve-up in the 1790s, and some Austrian. Prussia, meanwhile, opened with a demand to annex the whole Kingdom of Saxony, a key Napoleonic ally, offhandedly suggesting its monarch could be given some papal territory in Italy, currently occupied by Austria, as compensation. Austria wanted the Tyrol and adjacent territories back from Bavaria, who had been gifted them at the peak of Napoleon's dominance in return for their allegiance. That meant hard haggling over territories further west to be given up in compensation, and both Prussian and British concerns over control of the critical regions along the Rhine to be assuaged.

By the end of 1814, arguments were verging on the confrontational. The arch-intriguer Talleyrand, representing Louis XVIII, succeeded in intruding on the scene, and after some considerable efforts, made France party to a signed alliance with Britain and Austria on 3 January 1815. It seemed far from impossible that the spring would see a war between this grouping and a Russo-Prussian axis. The British minister Lord Castlereagh calculated that there could be a million men in conflict in central Europe within months. Prussia soon wavered, and further rounds of talks involving now five powers ground on through the winter. Castlereagh was joined by Wellington, after he had become so unpopular in Paris there were fears of attacks on his life. There was forward movement – Prussia would take half of Saxony, Russia almost all of the Grand Duchy – but much remained unsettled.

At this point, Napoleon intervened. News of his escape from Elba reached Vienna on 7 March, setting in train an immediate horror of prospective risings across many newly-subordinated territories. This hardened into a determination to resist the emperor's return that would see over half a

million troops committed to immediately converging on France. Even then, Austrian leaders were heard muttering fearfully about the passage of Russian troops near their capital, and carefully-policed movement routes had to be designated.

Nevertheless, the line against Napoleon, declaring him "subject to public vengeance" for his reappearance with "projects of confusion and disorder", held fast. This stance was further intensified as it became clear that the Napoleon who had returned in 1815 was preaching a very different message to the blustering autocrat of 1813.

### Napoleon's toxic legacy

By late April 1815, Napoleon as emperor had promulgated the so-called Additional Act or Charter of 1815, which took up liberal political concessions made by the restored monarchy, and doubled down on them. Veering sharply away from the tendencies of his own previous reign, Napoleon represented himself as he had 15 years before, as the heir of the Revolution and its Jacobin egalitarian traditions. Rights were guaranteed, censorship lifted, and in a clear nod to international liberal opinion, French participation in the slave trade was abolished.

Napoleon, of course, crashed to military defeat again in short order. But his swing to the left, almost certainly carried out cynically, left a lasting toxic legacy. It brought about within France the violent, murderous revenge that had been avoided a year before, a 'White Terror' of counter-revolutionary thuggery that killed hundreds, and a wider official purge that drove tens of thousands from official employment.

Napoleonic troops that retreated westwards in search of negotiated surrender were disparaged as the "brigands of the Loire". Over a million allied troops subjected France to an occupation far harsher than that of



1814, now understood to be retribution against a whole people who had rejected that year's magnanimity. Official vengeance swept up Marshal Ney, shot by firing-squad at the end of the year, and Joachim Murat, similarly disposed of in October, having been transformed from a monarch to a hunted fugitive by his quixotic attempt to raise Italy in Napoleon's support.

The formal Final Act of the Congress of Vienna was signed just nine days before the battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815, and the powers of Europe concluded their business in the city not long after Napoleon's final surrender. His brisk and extra-legal dispatch into distant exile reflected their general mood, as outstanding matters were rapidly dealt with. Metternich's Austria became the arbiter of affairs in a new German Confederation of 39 states, and simultaneously guardian of order in the Italian peninsula.

The pall of reactionary authoritarianism that soon settled over Europe was so thick and suffocating that the British government, imprisoning its own radical leaders after the 1819 Peterloo massacre in Manchester, could pose as a bastion of liberal tolerance.

### Repression and revolution

Revolution seemed the only route of redress for idealists and the oppressed, increasingly identifying themselves as 'nations' disregarded by the Vienna settlement. A continent held down by secret police and censors obsessed with subversive conspiracies, inevitably, brought forth subversive conspiracies. Southern Italy and Sicily saw failed insurrections in 1820; a little later, Spain fell to revolutionaries seeking the restoration of its liberal 1812 constitution.

The government of Bourbon France cemented its place in the new authoritarian order by launching a military invasion across the Pyrenees in 1823. A hundred thousand men, dubbed 'Sons of Saint Louis', successfully restored the absolutist monarchy with the agreement of the Congress powers.

In 1830, France itself fell to renewed revolution, although quickly capped off with a new constitutional monarchy that showed itself eager to suppress further risings. The southern provinces of the Netherlands rose up in the same year and made themselves a new country, Belgium, with a new German monarch of safely conservative tendencies installed as Leopold I. The same man, widower of King George IV's daughter and uncle of the future Prince Albert, had been offered the throne of newly-independent Greece earlier in 1830, but thought it too unstable. It was later accepted by another German prince, Otto, the second son of the King of Bavaria.



ABOVE The Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, with the seals of its signatories BELOW The Vienna system set up in 1815 was overtaken by a spirit of nationalism after 1848 – including, in this caricature, Bismarck's dominance over other states of the German Confederation

## The pall of reactionary authoritarianism that soon settled over Europe was thick and suffocating



These appointments showed how the monarchical elite of Europe accommodated change when they could not suppress it. But they continued trying to suppress it for as long as they could. The continent erupted in 1848 in the 'Springtime of Peoples', but again, outside France, which embarked on a repetitious odyssey of republicanism-turning-to-Bonapartism, revolutionaries were crushed by force across the continent, with Austrian, Prussian and Russian troops intervening wherever necessary to do so.

The end of the Vienna system came, not through challenge from below, but when the leaders of great powers themselves decided that other arrangements, including the carefully-managed stimulation of nationalist sentiments, were more useful to them.

Britain and France went to war with Russia in 1853 when their differences over influence in the Ottoman empire could no longer be negotiated away. At the end of the decade, France clashed with Austria in support of the schemes of another monarchy, Piedmont-Sardinia, to aggrandise itself into a Kingdom of Italy.

Through the 1860s, under the stewardship of Otto von Bismarck, Prussia fought first Denmark, then Austria, en route to securing dominance over the other states of the German Confederation. Bismarck's schemes were capped off with an engineered war against an over-confident France, resulting in the proclamation of a new unified German empire in the brutally symbolic setting of an occupied Palace of Versailles on 18 January 1871. Thus were the seeds of another century's conflicts firmly sown. ■

David Andress is professor of modern history at the University of Portsmouth. His latest book is *The French Revolution: A Peasants' Revolt* (Head of Zeus, 2019)

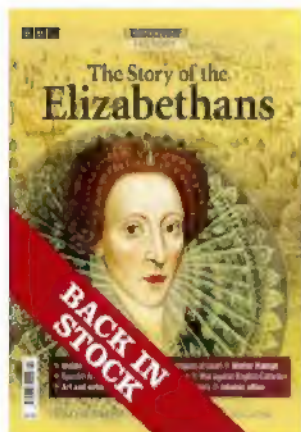


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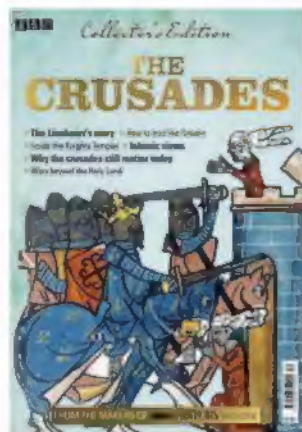
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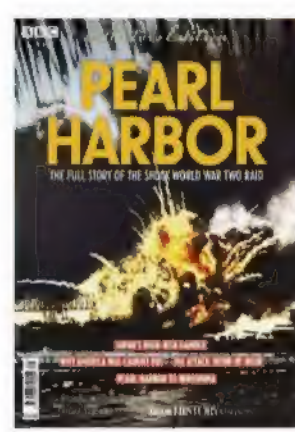
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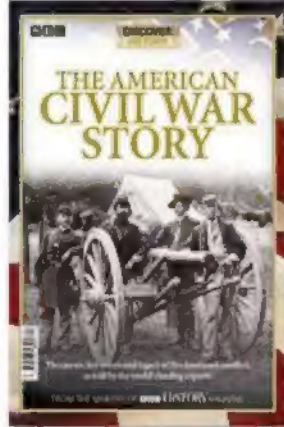
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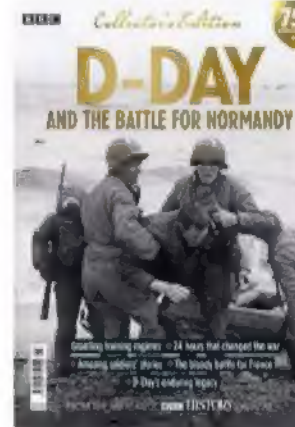
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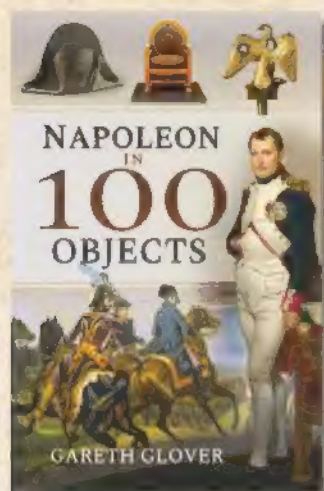
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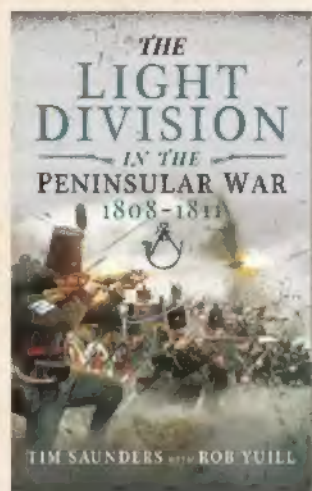
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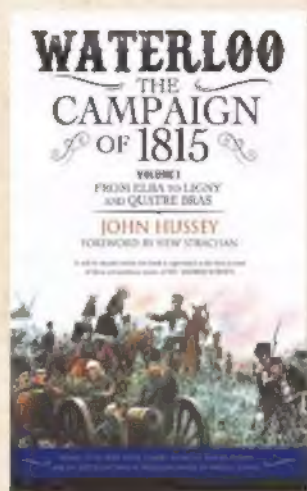
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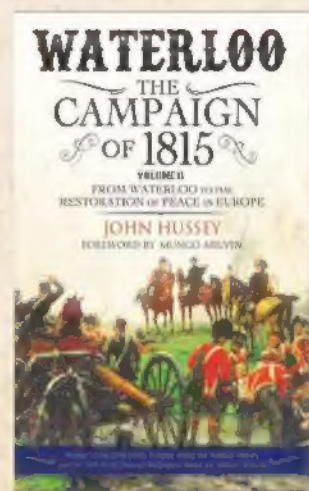
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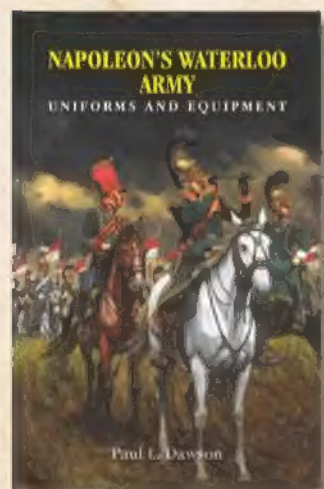
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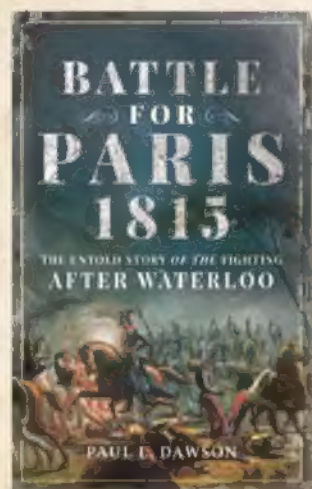
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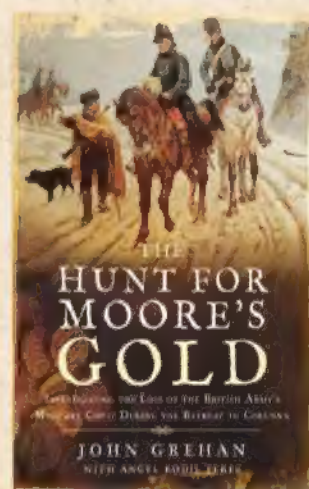
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